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Thro' Lattice-Windows

# THRO' LATTICE-WINDOWS ❧ BY W. J. DAWSON

*"And homely faces, seen where house-fires glow*
*Thro' lattice-windows, not in vain protest*
*Earth's humblest life her happiest and her best"*

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I WISH
TO ASSOCIATE WITH THIS BOOK
A NAME SIGNIFICANT
OF FAITHFULNESS IN FRIENDSHIP
FIRMNESS AND WISDOM IN COUNSEL
AND SINGULAR GENEROSITY IN CRITICISM

W. ROBERTSON NICOLL

TO WHOM
MANY WRITERS BESIDE MYSELF
OWE A DEBT NOT EASILY COMPUTED
AND BUT INADEQUATELY ACKNOWLEDGED
IN HONEST ADMIRATION
TRUE RESPECT
AND WARM AFFECTION

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# Thro' Lattice-Windows

## I

### WHERE THE SUN SHINES

STEPPING westward from South Barton, the traveller follows for about two miles a deeply shaded lane, which gradually becomes narrower and more uneven till it climbs abruptly to the open moorland. The last building which he passes on leaving the lane is a ruined windmill, which crowns a little green acclivity like a white lighthouse; and this illusion is still further strengthened by the sea-like emptiness and vastness of the surrounding scenery. Over this sad-coloured and unpopulated waste the wind beats incessantly, piping and crying in the dusk of summer days like a human voice, and passing with a sound like the noise of battling armies through the long nights of winter tempest.

The moor is broken and rugged, suggesting equally a boundless freedom and a lurking treachery. It invites and it repels, and there are moments when it were not difficult to imagine it possessed of a certain formless and subtle spirit of life. Perhaps such a spirit does inhabit it; and thus the perception of something awful and occult which haunts the traveller who penetrates its solitude is not altogether fanciful. When the nimble fire of dawn burns along its tumbled crests in a hundred fantasies of colour, it is easy to believe that great things have happened there; so vast a theatre can scarce be without its drama. But if such a drama be enacted, it is one in which man has no part, executed on a scale of plot and passion beyond his puny reach, the merely human being everywhere overwhelmed in the elemental and eternal.

The moor knows a hundred moods, but its greatest moment happens close on daybreak. If one should chance to visit Barton Moor at dawn, he will no-

tice something terrible in its solemnity of silence, and will hold his breath. From time to time, at inevitable intervals, a faint stir of air runs through the yellow gorse, as though the world breathed in its dreams. Northward, the broken summits of the hills are stained with indigo; a white scarf of mist floats along their base, through which the fir-trees rise like sentinels, silent, plumed, and spectral. Presently a long band of orange light appears to eastward, each instant glowing brighter, as though it were a fire fanned by a gigantic bellows. Simultaneously pink vapours, floating in the zenith, coil themselves into a roof of rose, and sanguine clouds begin to move in steady files, like the trained battalions of an army. The east glows and throbs now like the mouth of a mysterious furnace. Six miles away the red sail of a fishing boat absorbs the flame, and lies upon the water, a spot of unconsuming splendour. A moment later all the firmament is full of movement; flocks of

clouds appear, twisted and blown by some higher current of the air into a manifold caprice of form, and each touched with gold, or orange, or triumphant crimson. Above the band of yellow in the east, the eye discovers seas of emerald, shut in by turquoise cliffs, on which stray argosies of cloud hang becalmed. At last a throbbing splendour pushes up its rim above the distant heights, and a sudden lark begins to sing. The world becomes a wonder and a joy, and the silent watcher finds himself a mute spectator of the birth-throes of creation.

In more ways than one, this untutored moorland claims kinship with the neighbouring sea, to which it presents many obscure but palpable resemblances. When the slow purple shadows move across it, they give to the more distant hollows the exact aspect of curved waves, which carry darkness in their bosoms; and, at times, white seagulls may be seen floating motionless or sailing low over these long-ranged

immobile crests. On the northerly horizon many fir-plumed promontories push themselves out into this uncharted solitude in a sort of shore-line; and there is a sound of waters, too, for innumerous tiny streams hurry through the channels of the peaty soil, gathering here and there into shallow pools, which glitter blue in the distance with reflections of the eternal upper depths. Even the white road which zigzags over this immense expanse suggests a thin track of foam on dark and boundless waters. It is the one faint yet enduring record which man, with all his age-long effort, has been able to inscribe on this primeval wilderness — his scrawled signature on a blank page; or, to follow our ocean simile, the one signal that humanity has passed this way, as some bubbling track upon the solitary sea declares the vanished keels of destiny.

It is perhaps because man has been so visibly repulsed on Barton Moor, that here nature often meets us with a

certain air of tranquil amenity, and even magnanimity, as of one who can afford to be generous. She appears no longer in the grotesque disguise of a partial civilisation, and makes no scruple to disclose the naked wonder of her loveliness. The plough has never turned this soil, the sower never passed across the smoking furrow; yet here is a spacious beauty, and a wild riot of vitality not discovered in the most fertile pastures of the plain. Nowhere does the sunset linger longer in rich saturations of ethereal colour; nowhere is the air so brisk and pleasant; nowhere does the soil distil such pungent fragrances. The whole effect is of a vital and contented desolation.

Following this exposed and lonely moorland road, by many miniature declivities and heights, the traveller finds at last the fifth milestone, and with it the summit and boundary of the moor. The rolling purple waves end abruptly, as though arrested by a magic wand; they hang poised, as in the act of break-

ing, over a broad and pleasant valley. This is the valley of the Bar.

The valley is some two miles in breadth, and five or six in length. It is a land of orchards, pastures, and white farmhouses, where the passing of a thousand years has altered little in the essential aspects of human life. A clear stream flows softly through the valley, till it gains the ocean at St. Colam, whose clustering masts and glittering church-vane complete the perspective to the west. To the eastward, piled upon the rising ground above the river, is the town of Barford. On Sabbath mornings, when the air is still, the bells of Barford and St. Colam discourse antiphonies along this happy valley; and, on stormy nights when Atlantic gales are blowing, the noise of the sea murmurs in the hills as in some vast and convoluted shell.

Barford is a town by courtesy, a village in reality, but with many pleasant features of the English hamlet yet distinguishable. The houses crowd to-

gether in the High Street, with some vague purpose of municipal cohesion, but beyond it they elbow one another in a growing distance in the frankest scorn of uniformity. Outstanding gable-chimneys buttress every cottage; windows look out on you from unexpected angles. Lilac and laburnum, with here and there a crimson fuchsia, stand on guard at each porched doorway; it would seem that each was built for no other purpose but the picturesque. Bees murmur in the streets, and blazoned butterflies float unnoticed. Here the country has no quarrel with the town, and nowhere shall you find a land of happier fertility, more orderly, well cared for, habitable. An extraordinary richness of verdure and of foliage is everywhere, and the trees and pastures have a depth of colour in them as though purple mingled with their normal green. The air has a sweetness and a vigour all its own, soft, yet exhilarating, for it is distilled from the finest essences of the moorland and the sea.

Life passes slowly in these parts; a few thoughts suffice the wisest, a few joys the happiest. There is no confusion of impression, no sharpening of perception into morbid subtlety. Yet the primitive elements of all human tragedy are not wanting, for love sits beside the hearth, and sorrow weeps among the graves, and the stream that eddies under Barford bridge sings a song as ancient as the centuries.

This was, for me, the place where the sun always shone. One notices the days of rain only as one grows older; for the child all days were sunny. The old town glitters through a mist of gold, a faery town, under a firmament of divinest weather. And if to the maturer mind such unsubstantial allegories be accepted, and acceptable, no more, yet some authentic elements of joy remain undiminished, — the valley-wind, pungent with scents of sea and moorland, blowing through the streets, the bees hiving in the gardens, the larks singing high above the silent houses in the

noontide, the sound of a mother singing to her child in the open doorway, of a cradle rocked upon a brick floor, and of whispering voices in the dusk beneath the honeysuckled walls. Amid this later roar of towns one has but to close the eyes an instant, and the involuntary dream comes back, — the picture of red roofs and white walls beside the river, of an open market-place with groups of quaint and brightly coloured figures, of lattice-windowed houses, with their glitter of extreme cleanliness and proud boast of flowers; and behind these lattice-windows — what was not apparent long ago — the busy loom of life, producing hour by hour a fabric gay with coloured threads of comedy, and here and there shot with the darker threads of tragedy and fate.

Long years ago I marched over Barford bridge with imagined sounds of drum and trumpet to the great campaign of life. To-day I wander back again, quiet and lonely as a ghost. No one waits for me; none recognise or know

me: there is a silence in the streets. The bells are ringing through the mellow afternoon, but the chime is muffled. The sun still shines; but there is a sense of emptiness and coldness in the air. I look wistfully at the lattice-windows one by one, but strange faces move behind them. It makes me shiver. And there is a voice in the gardens behind the empty street singing the bees home, by which I know that death is here. Perhaps it is my youth only that is dead: it is for that the bell is tolling. I sit beside the old bridge and think, and one by one little humble shreds of old romance piece themselves together in my mind, episodes of love and faithfulness emerge, uncommemorated histories take significance and shape. When the evening falls I will pass again along the silent street, tapping lightly at these lattice-windows, and I think the old familiar faces will still greet me there, and the unforgotten voices speak.

## II

### THE CHILDREN OF AMALEK

THERE could be no doubt, none whatever, that Dexter was 'the worst man in the place.' His badness was of a quite incomparable order, so that when the various misdeeds of other Barford sinners were touched upon in pious conversation, Dexter was left out, as standing in a class by himself. His drunken shout had terrorised a generation of small mortals in Barford; his crapulous, disordered figure was known to everybody. He worked at intervals; shaved himself, or caused himself to be shaved, at longer intervals; washed with any true efficiency at yet longer intervals. Latterly the only work he had done was grave-digging, which being an intermittent employment entirely shaped itself with the general intermittence of his habits. Fearful stories were circulated

about the manner in which he did this work; the unholy songs he sung, the desecrating oaths he uttered, the many gallons of beer he consumed in the operation. 'One don't grudge him the beer,' was the general verdict, 'for 't is an awful job, a live man a-diggin' the place where a dead man is to lie, but he might keep a still tongue in 'is head while he 's at it.' 'An' 't is bad old ancient randy songs he do sing too,' remarked Mrs. Splown, whose house was near the graveyard. 'I 've heerd 'em myself, and 't is enough to make a body blush. A pity it is he don't know no hymn-tunes, nor somethin' kinder psalmy, like "My soul doth magnerfy."' But if Dexter knew any psalm tunes he never sung them in the graveyard. He did his work in a bacchanalian spirit, and many a girl hurrying past the churchyard wall in the dusk trembled at the sound of that dreadful voice, singing and laughing from the deep pit of death in drunken ecstasy.

Now it was a singular circumstance

that the worst man in the place was the father of two of the prettiest children, and that Polly and Johnny Dexter were always clean and tidy. This was manifestly something out of the course of nature, and provoked the cynicism of Craddock, who deduced therefrom the general law that Providence worked upon the absurd principle of sending the prettiest children to the ugliest and most worthless parents. But even Craddock was quite unable to explain the cleanliness and tidiness of the two children, except upon the obviously weak hypothesis that 'they did it theirselves, an' it came nateral to 'em.' No one had imagination enough to read the real solution of the mystery, which was that the worst man in the place actually loved his children, and cared for them with all the patience of a mother. The fact was Dexter washed them himself, and if any one had looked into the window of his ramshackle cottage about midnight, he would have seen the curious spectacle of this abandoned grave-dig-

ger laboriously trying to darn a small pair of socks, or mend a rent in some article of diminutive underclothing. If, further, such a spectator could have passed into the cottage invisibly, and have ascended the broken stair, he would have found two little golden-haired children lying asleep in a perfectly clean truckle-bed, and he would have observed that the soft calm of entire happiness suffused their faces, like sunshine on sleeping flowers. For Dexter kept all his bad deeds for the public, and his better deeds for his home. From the day when his wife died he had steadily gone to the bad, but the one uncorrupted spot in his heart was his love of his children. The sight of their innocent faces always recalled him to his better self, and it afforded him a certain ironic satisfaction to remember how bad he really was, and how good they thought him.

'I wonder you don't keep straight for the sake of your children,' said Reckitt to him severely, one day.

'Ah, Muster Reckitt,' he replied, with a grin, 'you ain't got no childer. Lor', you don't know what little deevils childer can be.'

Reckitt went away sadly, with the conviction that Dexter was an incorrigible brute. But perversity was one of Dexter's chief pleasures, and, having attained a character for supreme wickedness, not without considerable exertion, he did not wish to throw it away lightly. It pleased him to know that he had added another wilful and quite false element to his evil reputation, which would further establish him in his bad pre-eminence as the worst man in Barford. In his way Dexter was an artist. He knew how to live up to his part.

It will be easily believed that two small children, brought up in entire ignorance of any parental control, or any other sort of control, soon discovered many pleasant ways of extending their liberties. Dexter disappeared from his cottage in Bogie's Lane about seven in the morning, and from that

hour till evening the children did as they liked. Of course they were captured by Geake, the schoolmaster, whose modes of taming them proved wholly ineffectual. They were quick and bright children, who soon learned to read, but at that point they stubbornly refused to follow any further the sterile paths of knowledge. In the matter of Scripture Johnny early developed vigorous tendencies toward heresy, which, as Geake told the curate, were only such as might be expected in a child of Dexter's. After an Old Testament lesson one day, in which Geake had dilated at length on the intentions of God toward the children of Amalek, Johnny asked innocently whether ' God had not improved a good deal since those days.' The subsequent castigation which he received lessened his interest in Old Testament narratives, and gave to the act of truancy a greatly heightened fascination. When he and Polly talked the affair over in bed at night, they unanimously resolved that the children of Amalek were greatly to

be pitied, and they would have presented their votes of condolence in person, if they had had the least idea where these persecuted children were to be found. Upon the whole they were inclined to believe that Amalek was a bad word that had some reference to the gipsies, and they spent a delightful week of summer weather on the moors, looking in vain for wandering gipsy children, that they might reassure them as to their ultimate destiny.

Geake was very bitter on the subject of these repeated truancies, but, as he knew that it would be worse than useless to appeal to Dexter, he had to put up with them as best he could. In course of time the affair grew to the proportions of a public joke.

'There go Dexter's brats; you just watch 'em,' one person would say to another in the street. It was a sight quite worth watching. The two children would come along, hand in hand, with a look of excellent demureness on their faces, and turn up the road to the school-

house with what appeared to be the most scholarly intentions. But beside the school-house wall they usually paused. Johnny would stoop to tie his shoe, and Polly would whisper something in his ear, at which both children would look at the sky with questioning eyes.

'Going?' whispered Polly.

Then Johnny would look grave, and thrust his hands deep into his patched knickerbockers.

'I know where there 's a blackbird's nest, truly. I heard Billy Smith say he was going after it this evening. Truly.'

At this point the school-bell would stop ringing, the door would be shut, and if it were a fine morning the song of a lark would fall clear and sweet out of the upper air, with a wizard note of temptation in it.

'The door 's shut. It 's no good to go now, is it?' Johnny would reply, with the neatest air of melancholy, his eyes nevertheless subtly brightened by the lark's call.

'No, it 's no good. I 'll run you for an apple down the lane, Johnny.' And straightway the two small fugitives would disappear — once more to search for those miraculous children of Amalek upon the moors.

In the case of most children it is exceedingly improbable that an obscure phase of Old Testament history would have exercised any lasting power on the imagination, but Dexter's children were not as other children. They were lonely children; their life, their home, their very games were all lonely. A child's book they had never seen; the only book that approached that qualification was a dog's-eared copy of the 'Pilgrim's Progress,' which was the frequent companion of their truancies to the moors. The sad case of the children of Amalek was therefore elevated by them into a legend of first-rate importance and enduring fascination. They talked about it in bed at night, and soon wove round it a cycle of subsidiary legends. They realised a sense of almost personal tri-

umph when they discovered that these despised children of Amalek — and of course they were real children to them — once smote Israel and 'possessed the city of palm-trees.' What palm-trees were they could not imagine, but they soon decided that a group of stone-firs on the highest part of the moor might very well represent them, and they took possession of them in the most matter-of-fact way in the name of Amalek. Here they kept tryst through long summer days, waiting for these dream-children of their fancy to put in an appearance, and discussing gravely from which part of the purple-shadowed moorland they would make their approach. In the meantime the wind in the firs sung them strange songs, and Polly spelled through the more dramatic passages of the 'Pilgrim's Progress,' with a marked preference for the fight with Apollyon, and the city where all the trumpets blew on the other side of the river; and the two lonely children might well have been pitied by some kind angel, of starred

and rainbowed wings, had he but happened to have come that way. But if no angel came, butterflies with wings of azure and beaten gold came, and dragonflies in jewelled armour and diamond gauze, and flowers, which are the stars of the earth, grew round their feet, and the gorse like a burning bush flared on every hilltop; so that Dexter's children were supremely happy, and were in no wise to be pitied by the urchins into whose dull brains Geake was engaged in whacking and thumping the rule of three. Their one perennial disappointment was that, although they had found the city of palm-trees right enough, and had saved their lunch as long as possible every day, with the vague notion that they must be prepared to show due hospitality to the hereditary foes of Israel if they came, yet these mysterious, persecuted, and forlorn children of Amalek never came — doubtless, through some misunderstanding of the reception that awaited them, and a deadly fear of Geake and the town police force.

But one has only to wait long enough and the miraculous is sure to happen, and one day the children of Amalek really arrived.

They were very brown, dirty, and hungry, and made short work of the frugal lunch that was pityingly offered them. They then explained that they belonged to a caravan, which was pitched a mile away in Deadman's Hollow. Johnny looked grave at this information, for Deadman's Hollow had not an alluring sound; but Polly, recognising in it something akin to the Valley of Apollyon, was all for an immediate exploration, having hopes that she might even be permitted to see Apollyon himself, by way of special favour. She did not see that winged and armoured figure of her dreams, but she saw a pair of tall gipsies, who examined her clothes with many exclamations in an unknown tongue. She made no resistance when they gave her boots to a grinning child of Amalek who stood by, because she felt that, after marching about all these years with the hand of

God against them, her new friends might fairly claim a little sacrifice on her part; and besides, she had a natural preference for bare feet. The inside of the caravan, with its air of snugness, delighted and amazed the children, and when the bony horse was put into the shafts, and they found themselves moving away on the broad sandy road toward St. Colam, they felt the exquisite delight of adventure. After a while they fell asleep, with the happiest 'I-told-you-so' consciousness that the children of Amalek were not so bad as they were painted. When they woke up they were miles away from the city of palm-trees, and instead of the blowing of trumpets they heard the organ-note of the sea, and the sons of Amalek in violent altercation round the door of the van.

In the meantime Barford was enjoying the trepidations of a first-rate sensation. Dexter had been seen running up the street at night quite sober and in great agitation. Geake smiled grimly; he

alone extracted from the situation a sweet drop of personal triumph. Dexter's children became the question of the hour.

'T is a judgment on him,' Mrs. Splown explained. 'You can't expect but the Almighty 'll punish a drunken raskell like him, what sings his randy songs while he 's a-diggin' decent people's graves. Him as made us ain't a-goin' to put up wi' a chap like Dexter for ever no more. My man used ter go on the same way, an' I offen said to him, says I, "Splown, Him as is above 'll have it outer you some day for your drunken ways, for all you blow the orgin in the church a-Sundays." An', sure enough, he died mysterious, his liver 'aven slipped down suddin, and no doctor bein' able to put it back agen, though it warn't for want o' tryin', which they did night an' day for nigh on three weeks, which you could 'ear his groans on the other side the street. Not but what it 's hard the Almighty hev took them dear childer, which He might hev

took Dexter, as no one would ha' missed. But that 's jest the contrairy way things do go in this world, as might make one think Him as is above do forget all about it now an' then, though God forgie me for a-saying it, knowin' as the curate do lodge wi' me an' would n't approve.'

The good woman thereupon ran indoors, and, having spanked as many of the children as she could catch as a warning against truancy, sat down and burst into tears over the general contrariness of things.

But when the third day came and there was no news of the lost children, public sympathy began to go out strongly toward poor Dexter. The man looked so pale and forlorn that a heart of stone might have pitied him. People began to remember that the worst man in the place was a human creature. The Misses Splashett, of the Red House, a pair of dear withered spinsters, who had the most definite convictions on the origin and destiny of the world, did in-

deed send him a few tracts of a somewhat inflammatory description, but as they were accompanied by a large basket of provisions, including cakes made with their own frail hands after a special recipe transmitted through ten generations of Splashetts, their conduct might be confidently accounted to them for righteousness. Dexter became a sort of inverted hero. It was remembered that he had always been kind to the children, and a man who had known him in St. Colam in earlier days industriously spread the rumour that before his wife died Dexter had been a 'reg'lar church-goer' and 'as decent a chap as might be.'

'Ay,' said Craddock, 'Dexter's none so bad. A man as sings at his work ain't never very bad, though he don't allers sing what's fittin'. I'd liefer trust him any day than a fellow like Geake, whose face is allers screwed up hard as though his mouth was full o' sour sloes, an' his blood run vineger. I'll warrant now as Geake thinks them

poor childer is made away wi' jest because they did n't come to schule reg'lar. It 'd be a mighty poor sorter world if Geake was the Lord A'mighty.'

Dexter's own view of the situation was pathetically simple.

'I 'll allow,' he said to the curate, with tears streaming down his face, 'that I did n't deserve no childer like them. But, Muster Reckitt, I loved 'em dear, I did. I promised her as died I 'd allers look well arter 'em, an' so I hev. You ask 'em if I ain't loved 'em dear. An' I 'll tell you what, Muster Reckitt, if so be as God 'll let me hev 'em back, I 'll never touch another drop o' drink as long as I live. Look 'e here, Muster Reckitt, them 's their best clothes, an' them 's Johnny's little shoes what I mended mysel', an' many a night I 've set up a-menden their little things. P'raps if I 'd ha' bought 'em some toys they would n't ha' run away, but someway, bein' a man o' clumsy mind, I never thought o' that. It 's hard for a man o' clumsy mind to justly remem-

ber what little childer do like. But I tried my best, sir, indeed I did, an' I loved 'em dear.'

Search parties went out upon the moors, ponds were dragged, and every inch of the river bank down to St. Colam was sedulously searched. Dexter lived with the constant vision before his eyes of the children being carried up the street, Johnny's little hand hanging limp with the water dripping from it, and Polly with green river-weed tangled in her golden hair. In his dreams he heard the drip of deathly water, and saw white faces, luminously alive, rising out of the green scum of desolate pools. His thoughts never lit upon the truth. His dreams turned wholly upon death, and held dreadful pictures of all the graves he had ever dug, in each one of which, as he stooped to gaze, lay two still pale faces, softer and paler than the white flowers that lay at their feet, or the linen pillow on which their heads rested in the long repose. And from that dim and populous land of dreams

came such cries and sighs of infinite agony and despair that Dexter woke trembling, with the sweat of a great terror on his brow.

In the meantime the two children, after a week of most romantic happiness, had arrived at the distressing conclusion that the children of Amalek were, after all, persons of dubious character, and that any prolonged friendship with them presented unsuspected difficulties. It is no doubt a delightful thing to be initiated into the mysteries of guddling trout and snaring rabbits, but it is less delightful to find your clothes gradually transferred to the backs of your instructors. Moreover, the children of Amalek had learned many bad habits in their long exile, among which was fighting without cause, and swearing without ceasing, not to speak of a tendency to devour their food with extreme rapidity, as a prelude to a ravenous raid upon the platters of their guests. Altogether, a week was quite sufficient to explode the Amalek legend, and so it happened

that when the master of the caravan set the children down upon the road one windy October morning, and gruffly bade them 'cut along home,' they felt a joyous but unconfessed sense of release.

But where was home? Alas, they did not know. The clouds rolled black across the moor, and the sea bellowed loud at their backs, and there was no sign of the 'city of palms.' The stones cut their bare feet, the rain came in gushes like the spouting of a geyser, and never were there two more forlorn little pilgrims on the forsaken roads of this habitable earth. But Polly, being a child of bright imagination, carried off the situation with a fine bravery.

'It 's the hill Difficulty, this hill is, Johnny. An' round the corner I guess there 's the Interpreter's House.'

'Can you hear the trumpets blowing on the other side?' asked Johnny, in a tearful voice.

'Why, not yet. Of course! We are n't near far enough.'

'Suppose we meet 'Polyon?'

'Oh, but you won't. He lives right away over there' — with a sweep of a little ragged arm in the general direction of America. 'Let me carry you a little bit, Johnny.'

'I'm a man, and shan't be carried. I'm goin' to take care of you. I only asked where 'Polyon was 'cause I wanted to fight him,' said Johnny proudly, but with manifest untruth.

'Shall I tell you somethin', Johnny?'

'A tale?'

'No; somethin' true.'

'What is it?'

'There is n't no real 'Polyon, I don't think. He 's dead a long while ago, truly.'

This refreshing intelligence greatly comforted Johnny, who straightway began to walk with much dignity, as though he were personally responsible for the demise of that ghostly enemy.

It was late at night when the two ragged little mortals caught sight of

the veritable 'city of palms' cresting the hill of heather above Barford. At that very hour a forlorn man was plodding up the hill, and, standing for a moment on its ridge, he saw in the broken moonlight two fluttering little figures emerge from the shadows of the tall fir-trees.

'Why, it 's father,' shouted Polly. 'But he is n't singin', not a bit. I guess he 's sorry 'cause we wented away.'

Dexter, at the sound of the voice, rushed forward like a man with winged feet. In a moment the fugitives were in his arms.

'We 've been 'mong the Malekites, but when we wented we did n't mean to stay so long,' sobbed Polly.

'An' we don't like them any more,' said Johnny gravely. 'We love you best, father dear.'

Half an hour later there was a great shout in Barford High Street. Dexter was coming up the street with Polly on his shoulders and Johnny in his arms.

'Well, to be sure,' said Mrs. Splown, as she ran out to kiss the children, ''t is jest like Scripter. 'T is the dead as is alive, an' the lost as is found.'

'There 's some one else as is found beside the childer,' said Dexter joyously.

## III

## WHY THOMAS CRADDOCK DID NOT GO TO CHURCH

THE reasons why Thomas Craddock did not go to church were, like his supposed reasons for being unmarried, somewhat inscrutable to the public, though no doubt sufficing to himself. When Nathaniel Dring, who had married his third wife, and had been rendered presumptuous by that circumstance, started out one fine spring morning to convert Craddock to the toleration of matrimony as a social institution of some importance, it was generally admitted that he got the worst of the argument. For when Dring asserted with quite unnecessary effusiveness that he had never had a cross word with one of his three wives, Craddock merely grunted, 'How monotonous,' and indicated by a

slight smile, which seemed to confine itself to the corners of his grim mouth, that he regarded Dring's statement as a cunningly devised fable.

'Not as I object to your marryin' as many wives as you like,' he added, by way of conciliation, 'though when a man has 'ad three wives in seven years, 't is uncommon like polygamy, which is forbidden in the new dispensation.'

'But marriage is ordained for the mutual help, society, and comfort the one ought to have of the other,' retorted Dring, with a sudden recollection of the terms of the Marriage Service, with which his acquaintance was intimate and unusual. 'You can't say, Craddock, but what you 'd be a good deal happier for a tidy woman to look arter you, an' talk to you when you 're lonely.'

'No doubt, no doubt,' he replied, with a gleam in his grey eyes which wiser persons than Dring had long ago recognised as dangerous. 'But s'pose she talked when I was n't lonely, eh?

They do, you know, friend Dring; they do — at times. I can't deny but what I've know'd a case or two. Maybe you've know'd such a case yourself, eh?"

There was always something peculiarly irritating in the '*eh*' of Thomas Craddock. It was something between a malignant chuckle and the sharp explosive click of a secret spring, which one could fancy was ingeniously concealed in his lean throat. Craddock's throat was one of his strong points. When he spoke, what is called an Adam's apple shot up and down like the weight on the machines for the trial of the relative strength of men's fists at fairs. It possessed a dreadful fascination for children, and in the minds of older people was curiously associated with ideas of pugnacity — like the weight on the machines at the fair again. It was the common belief of the children that this untoward Adam's apple was the diabolic instrument which produced that ominous *eh?* and, viewed in the light of

natural phenomena, the belief did not appear to be wholly irrational.

'There ain't enough for us all, anyway, an' if you take more 'n your share, it stands to reason some o' we poor chaps must go without. We starvin' chaps do do it out o' pure good nature, jest to oblige you greedy chaps — eh?"

At this point in the argument, Dring recollected an engagement, and sauntered up the street with the fine affectation of a man absorbed in vast affairs.

When he had gone, Craddock hammered vigorously at the boot that lay on his lap, and said to himself grimly, 'He 've meekened two on 'em, he 'ave; I misdoubt but the third one 'll meeken him before he 's done wi' her — eh?' And the 'eh' sounded more than ever like a malicious chuckle.

Craddock was a man who suffered from an unsatisfied thirst for knowledge, which accounted for the circumstance that on the wall of the dingy room where he worked at his shoemaking there was conspicuously displayed a

map of the world. When he was very lonely he looked at the map, and was straightway consoled with the sense of the multitudinousness of life; when he was oppressed with the narrowness of his career, he reflected on the immensity of the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, and repeated the heights of the great mountains which were boldly printed on the map. It caused him a curious pleasure — or at least a negation of pain — to reflect on the number of people reported to exist in London, New York, or Chicago, a great many of whom were no better off than himself. Chimborazo was a name that thrilled him, and the Himalayas brought suggestions of infinity to his lonely thoughts. He would have liked to know something of astronomy, but as there was no one to tell him anything, he contented himself with Job's enumeration of Arcturus, and Orion, and the sweet influences of the Pleiades, which planets he had tried to identify in vain in his solitary night-walks on the moors.

Many efforts had been made to induce him to attend public worship on the Sunday, but none had succeeded. He was always ready to receive any sort of embassy upon the subject, but no amount of argument made any difference to his habits. Every Sunday morning he shaved, put on a prehistoric blue coat with brass buttons, four only of which remained, lit a short pipe, and disappeared in the direction of the moors. For some years he had been accompanied by an old retriever dog, but when the dog died he never got another, and henceforth went alone. The mystery of his proceedings was further enhanced by the circumstance that he usually carried in his hand a small black book, not unlike a Bible, carefully wrapped in a red cotton handkerchief. There were not wanting those who said that the book was doubtless an atheistic publication, — Paine's 'Age of Reason,' the schoolmaster once affirmed in unjust conjecture, which, being destitute of any element of proof, did

much to raise the schoolmaster's reputation for pious and almost preternatural sagacity. People who did not scruple to discuss every sort of question with Craddock had never quite ventured to ask him what was the book he took with him on his solitary Sabbath walks. Perhaps it was because they did not wish to destroy the dramatic mystery which attached to it; more likely it was because there was something in Craddock's grim mouth which warned them not to go too far with him.

It was not until Reckitt, the new curate, came that Craddock's doings attracted wide public notice, and he himself became a personage. Reckitt was an indefatigable little fellow, with strong views on the divine necessity of State Churches and the providential government of the world as displayed in an apostolical succession. He was slightly lame in one foot, but his lameness did not prevent him tramping up and down in all weathers in heroic attempts to shepherd a scattered and somewhat

recalcitrant flock. He never wore an overcoat — out of mere vanity, some people said, because if he had he would have covered up the silver cross which was conspicuously displayed on his black watch-ribbon. Motherly women, with a sound traditional faith in the virtues of flannel, were much exercised in their minds on the conjectural subject of his under-clothing, and remarked that he did not look strong, and that his landlady, Mrs. Splown, was not a person calculated to exercise a proper watch over either his health or his clothing, since she was 'moithered' with a large family, and was a person known to entertain lax views on the airing of linen. But the little curate limped upon his heroic way ignorant of these criticisms, and put so brave a face on matters that no one but himself knew that according to the best medical opinion his lungs were not good for more than two years' work at most.

One day he met the schoolmaster and asked him if he knew a man called

Craddock,— 'A shoemaker, you know, a bony, angular man, with a long throat and a lot of grey hair — lives in Tibbit's Row.'

As every one in Barford knew everybody else, this question was quite unnecessary, which fact, however, did not prevent the schoolmaster rubbing his chin meditatively, as if that operation helped him to recall the well-known physiognomy of Craddock. When the aforesaid operation had been satisfactorily completed, he admitted cautiously that he might have seen him, pronouncing his words in such a way as to intimate that it was by no means his habit to notice such persons as Craddock, although for reasons connected with a State Church it might be the duty of a person in the apostolic succession to do so.

'I find he does n't go to church,' said Reckitt.

'There 's a good many in Barford that don't,' said the schoolmaster, with a fresh rubbing of his chin.

'But he does n't go to chapel either. It 's bad enough to be a Dissenter, but he is n't even that. In fact, he does n't go anywhere at all.'

The schoolmaster thought this very likely, and being emboldened by an opportunity of explaining Craddock's true character, which might never occur again, went on to repeat his conjectural information about the nature of the book which Craddock carried with him on his Sunday walks.

The curate was much shocked. He would at once have gone to Craddock and demanded an explanation, had not the schoolmaster promptly repudiated all authority for his own statement, and further suggested that a lost sheep like Craddock should be treated with tenderness, not to say with diplomacy.

'Well, Geake,' said the curate at last, 'perhaps you 're right. I 'll tell you what we 'll do. I 'm going to hold a public discussion on the necessity of a State Church in the schoolroom next Tuesday. Get Craddock to come. It 's

not like going to church, you see. I think the man likes me — in a way; and if he comes, perhaps something I may say may bring him to the right way of thinking.'

When the discussion was held on the following Tuesday, Craddock was there, to the great surprise of everybody and the exceeding joy of the curate. It was on this occasion that Craddock's reputation as a controversialist was finally established.

It was generally admitted that the curate spoke with great ability, and the deacons of the old meeting-house, who had lived for fifty years in the fixed opinion that Dissent possessed the monopoly and only true patent of oratory, whatever else it lacked, were much surprised. There had never been a rector of Barford with the slightest capacity for public speech, and Reckitt shone all the more brightly by comparison with generations of fumble-mouthed apostolical successors. The curate's peroration was exceedingly impressive. He

compared all other sects and churches to ships more or less adrift, whose lights were of an illusory and vanishing character, whereas 'the Church' — he did not condescend to any more exact designation — was like a lighthouse, standing grandly amid the storms, founded on the immutable rock, and shedding a serene perpetual radiance on the troubled waters of Time. He sat down amid loud applause, and even the deacons of the old meeting-house could scarce forbear to cheer.

It was then that Craddock rose from a form at the extreme end of the room, and asked permission to say a few words. There was a general feeling of dismay, which was not lessened when he ignored the chair, and pointedly addressed the curate as 'Muster Reckitt, sir.' A more inappropriate David for such a struggle with the Philistine could not have been imagined, and the deacons of the meetin'-house were much grieved.

'Chair, chair!' cried the audience.

'Oh, I forgot the cheer, did I?' the

old man went on serenely. 'Well, then, I'll say Muster Cheer, sir, if so be that 'll suit you better. I ain't a man as is give to public speech, an' I would n't hev got up, only I thought maybe as Muster Reckitt would like to hear the views of a — a sorter outsider so to speak.'

Here the curate nodded assent, which, as several of the motherly women remarked, showed 'a angelic temper' on his part.

'Now what was it as Muster Reckitt did say? If I heerd aright, he did say as Church were a lighthouse, which by all accounts is a very respectable sort of place, but not one as folk is particular anxious to live in — eh? There 's a lighthouse down to St. Colam, as you may know, an' I know all about it, 'cause my brother was a keeper there. Well, 't was uncommon risky work a-gettin' to it, to begin with. 'T was only fine days you could go anigh it, an' when you got there you did n't see nothin' to make you wish to stay; an' Muster Reckitt,

'e says as Church is a lighthouse — eh?'

There was a burst of laughter at this sally, though I think it was mainly provoked by that chuckling *eh*, which went off like a sharp report, as though Craddock were engaged in firing guns over the grave of Reckitt's metaphor.

'But that is n't all. A lighthouse is a cold draughty sorter a place anyway. Them as lives in it sees the ships a-goin' past, an' oftentimes wishes they was on 'em, an' is sorry enough they ever give up the sea to start livin' on a bit o' rock. It may be as the ships toss up an' down a bit, an' sometimes one on 'em goes down, an' her lights is dowsed; but 't is ten times happier work a-livin' on a ship any day than what it is on a lighthouse, 'cause they as lives on a ship is free, an' they as lives on a lighthouse is n't. An' half the winter through the lighthouse is in a fog, an' then her light ain't much use. In a fog, Muster Reckitt — or I beg pardon, Mr. Cheer — and passon said as Church were a lighthouse — eh?

'But I ask further, what do that there light upon the lighthouse mean when so be it does shine? What do that there bell mean when they ring it slow and solemn in a fog? Muster Reckitt did n't tell we that. P'raps he forgot. Well, I 'll tell him, though I be only an outsider, so to speak. The light an' the bell both do mean same thing. They say, "Beware o' me; there 's danger here." And Muster Reckitt, 'e said as Church were a lighthouse. Eh?'

Having fired this last gun over the grave of an unhappy metaphor, Craddock smiled benignly on the audience, wiped his forehead with the back of his hand, and, with a final cluck of the instrument in his throat, sat down amid general laughter.

Now it happened that about a month after this famous controversy the curate went to St. Colam to spend a quiet Sunday with his friends. His winter work had tired him out, and, brave as he was, he was beginning to doubt if he could live through another winter. It was a

day of ethereal brightness, with a suave and sparkling air, and in the afternoon he was tempted to walk along the cliffs toward a little deserted church that stood on the cliff's edge about midway between St. Colam and Barford. It was twenty years or more since it had been used. Part of the tower had fallen, and the west front was fractured. Its graveyard hung forlornly over the sea on a gentle slope, and quiet sheep were feeding on the grassy barrows of the dead. Reckitt limped slowly up the hill, for now that he had no duty to hold him taut he made no pretence of energy. He came softly over the crisp turf, entered the gateless porch, and was about to pass round the chancel to the little graveyard, when he was arrested by the sound of a voice. It was speaking in a low monotone. Presently it rose into a clear mournful cadence, and his ear recognised the sublime phrases of the Burial Service.

'*Thou knowest, Lord, the secrets of our hearts; shut not Thy merciful ears*

*to our prayer: but spare us, Lord most holy, O God most mighty, O holy and merciful Saviour, Thou most worthy Judge eternal, suffer us not at our last hour for any pains of death to fall from Thee.*'

There was a long pause, and a skylark could be heard singing over the sea. Then the voice began again:

'*Forasmuch as it hath pleased Almighty God of His great mercy to take unto Himself the soul of our dear sister here departed* —

'No, no . . . O my God, I can't say that,' the voice broke forth in sudden agony. 'O Lizabeth, Lizabeth, why did you leave me?'

The curate knew not what to do. At first he had been ready to suppose that an interment was going on, but that thrilling cry, '*O Lizabeth*,' revealed not the solemn priest, but the human mourner. He felt that he had no right to intrude on that mystery of grief, — and yet, what if there was some poor soul here who needed comfort, — what

if God had given him this bit of work to do on this Sabbath, when by reason of weakness he could not preach?

He stepped softly out of the shadow of the chancel, and looked over the huddled stones. A man was kneeling beside one of them which looked more cared for than the rest. It was Craddock. In the same instant the two men recognized one another.

The curate was about to turn away, when Craddock beckoned him. He limped over the turfy mounds, and came to the old man, putting out his hand to him as he came.

'Look,' said Craddock grimly.

The stone had been freshly scraped and lettered. It bore no memorial verse, — two names only and a date: —

ELIZABETH CRADDOCK
and her Infant Child,
July 18th, 1845.

There was a lilac bush in full blossom on the grave, and beside it lay a worn

Book of Common Prayer, open at the Burial Service.

'You 're a good man, Muster Reckitt,' said Craddock slowly. 'You . . . you understand. I loved her . . . my Lizabeth . . . an' forty years don't make no difference. I 've come here every Sunday these forty years, and read them same words over her, an' I can't yet say that prayer 'bout thankin' God it hev pleased Him to take her. . . . I 've been tryin' all these years. . . .

'This is the Prayer Book we read together the night before we was married. That 's why I don't come to church. . . . I come where she is, an' I think God 'll understand, an' not be hard on me. . . . You 'll kep' my secret, Muster Reckitt — eh?"

For answer the curate took Craddock's rough hand in his. 'God bless you, Craddock,' he said softly. He picked up the open Prayer Book, and read in a clear voice that trembled a little the prayer for all sorts and conditions of men, laying special emphasis

on the words, 'those who are in any ways afflicted or distressed in mind, body, or estate; that it may please Thee to comfort and relieve them . . . giving them patience under their sufferings, and a happy issue out of all their afflictions.'

The lark sang overhead, and the sound of the sea and the fragrance of the lilac mingled in the spring wind.

Craddock stood with bowed head, and felt for one hushed instant the passage of an angel of peace upon the air.

# IV

## THE TIRED WIFE

NO one in Barford had ever given Geake credit for much heart, and there was certainly nothing in his behaviour to encourage the suspicion that he possessed such an organ. He was a high-dried looking man, whose very appearance suggested a lack of the generous juices of humanity. His very gait had a mechanical stiffness and precision, and he was generally regarded rather as a mechanism than a man. If he had any feelings, they were so sedulously concealed that in course of time their existence was generally forgotten, and he himself was the last person to make any active demonstration on their behalf.

People took so little interest in him as a man that, when he fell ill during the

Christmas holidays, it was a week before even Reckitt knew anything about it. This may be taken as conclusive of the manner in which Geake was generally regarded, since the illness of any one else in Barford would have been matter of common report in less than twenty-four hours. But even Mrs. Splown, who had a vampire-like capacity for scenting out news of this kind, and whose meat and drink was the discussion of the many mysterious symptoms to which human flesh is heir, knew nothing about it.

It was a morning of hard frost, black and dismal, when Reckitt went to the schoolhouse to inquire for the sick dominie, and little as the curate was used to comfort, he shivered at the bleak disorder of the house. Books and papers lay scattered in the narrow living-room, and the hearth was mountainous with ash and half-burnt coal. The window had not been opened for a week, and the air was stale and acrid. On the steep stair leading to Geake's bedroom

the carpet hung in shreds, and the paper on the wall was discoloured with damp. In the bedroom the furniture was old and broken. Clothes lay piled upon the floor, and books lay upon the bed. It was not the squalor of poverty that met the eye; it was the more sorrowful squalor and confusion of a house in which no woman's step was ever heard, no woman's hand was ever busy, except the hand and step of the hireling.

Perhaps it was this suggestion of the absence of woman in the house that led Reckitt to note particularly a miniature in a black frame that hung over the bedroom mantel. It represented a young woman, whose face was noticeable for a certain bright candour which had all the effect of beauty. The brown hair was piled high above the smooth forehead, and the hazel eyes had a singular liquid fulness. The nose was delicately aquiline, and the face itself a perfect oval. It was the face of a woman made for love, and especially for that form of love which shields and protects, and

finds its joy in serving rather than in being served.

Geake, as he lay back on his tousled pillows, noticed Reckitt's eyes seeking the miniature from time to time. They had talked of indifferent things, and Reckitt had risen to go. But when Reckitt put out his hand in farewell, he was suprised to find that Geake held it fast. A soft wave of trouble spread itself over the sick man's face. His lips moved and stammered. There was a gleam of unusual fire in his hard grey eyes.

'I don't know why I should speak,' said Geake slowly, 'except that I 'm lonely. I 'm not the sort of man who needs friendship when I 'm well. But I 've lain here a week in dreadful silence. . . . No one has come, no one has cared. I 've heard the ice crackle outside, the wind cry at night, but never a step upon the path. It 's come home to me that I 'm not loved. It 's a terrible thing to feel that. And once things were different. . . . O, sir,' and his voice

suddenly broke into a wail, 'I've heard you say that there's something in human nature that makes confession necessary. It's true. You can bear things in silence for thirty years, but the hour comes when you must speak or die. And when I saw you looking at that face, things came back to me . . . the past . . . the pain, the sin . . . and I want to make confession.'

Reckitt looked pitifully at the hard face, with its fringe of iron-grey whisker, and deep lines across the brows, and was about to speak, when Geake interrupted him.

'I don't want you to say anything. There's a little warm jet of feeling bubbling up in my heart just now. If you speak, if you sympathise, I believe it will freeze again at once. Let me speak — do you listen. That's all I ask.'

He put his hand over his eyes, and began to talk like a man in a dream.

'It'll surprise you, no doubt, sir, to know that I once had a wife. It's a

long time ago, long before I came to Barford. In those days I lived at Belchester, and there are still people who will tell you that no one in Belchester thirty years ago had a better chance of happiness than John Geake. I took orders when I was three-and-twenty, and at twenty-six, mainly by family influence, was appointed to the living of St. Peter's in Belchester, and had excellent chances of further preferment. It was a small living, but it was sufficient for my needs, for at that time my plan of life was simple enough. Immediately on my appointment to the living I married — the face yonder is the face of my wife. I don't need to tell you what sort of woman she was; there are some women whose souls shine in their faces.'

'I never knew you had been in orders,' interrupted Reckitt. He felt a great pity for the man.

'No one in Barford does know it,' rejoined Geake bitterly. 'It is something I want to be forgotten. I've

sunk a good deal since those days, but not nearly so low as I deserve.'

There was a pause, and Geake stirred uneasily. Suddenly he removed his hand from his face, and sat up in the bed. His hard face seemed mystically softened, and when he began to speak again there was a new note in his voice.

'You 've seen something of life and known something of men,' he continued; 'has it ever happened to you to know a man whose curse was reticence? I 'll tell you what I mean — it's not altogether reticence of speech, but a sort of hard constriction in the heart that prevents a man giving way to his emotions, however much he may want to do it. Well, I have always been conscious of it. As a youth I was proud and reserved. I remember that, when I left home first, I left without kissing my mother. I wanted to badly enough, for my heart was sore in me, but my monstrous pride whispered at my ear that it would be unmanly. I was always haunted by a sense that it was a sort of

shameful weakness to give way to feeling, even when feeling was strongest in me. In my heart I was constantly rehearsing passionate speeches of love, but as sure as the time came to utter them, a cold finger was laid upon my lips, and my heart seemed turned to iron. As a child I never ran to kiss my mother as the other children did. I simply could not. I raged in private with myself about it, and I could see by the grieved look in my mother's eyes that she felt it; but I was powerless to alter it. I was like a man chained to a pillar by invisible chains, — a shivering and starving man who saw fire and food, but could not get at them.

'Well, it did seem that when I first met Alice I had got the better of my difficulty. To my infinite delight I found that I could speak as I felt. My heart seemed to thaw and expand. There was an almost delirious joy in the sense of freedom from that inner obstruction which had maimed my life. It was as though the strong flood of a

first love had broken down some obstinate valve in my nature, and my heart beat freely.

'For some weeks after our marriage I revelled in this new freedom. It was an intoxicating joy. Merely to kiss Alice set every nerve in me trembling with delight. I was almost afraid of the excess of pleasure which I found in the least contact with her. It was a pleasure that went through me like a strong wind, and shook me, as a wind shakes a forest. And in my ignorance of myself I thought, "This will last for ever. This is the very love of which poets have sung, and it has come to me." My whole life had burst into flower at the touch of some miraculous spring.

'I need n't tell you that it did not last, that it all altered, but it was by such slow degrees that I was barely conscious of it.

'One incident I remember — I think it marked the first moment of alteration. We had gone for a walk one afternoon

beside the river, which was then in spring flood. About a mile and a half from Belchester, the river flows through a small gorge. There are no rocks, but the grass banks slope steeply, and after rain are slippery. Alice was full of girlish spirits that day, and ran down the banks in search of primroses. I called to her to come back, for I was in terror lest she should slip, but she only waved her hand gaily, and took no notice. When she returned to me she affected to think that it was all a silly piece of arbitrary conduct on my part in calling her back. Now it was really no such thing; it was, as I have said, unselfish terror for her safety. I could have told her so in a word, and I knew how her eyes would have softened with happy tears had I spoken my lover's fears — but I could not say the word. For the first time since our marriage a shadow had come between us; the old obstinate valve seemed to close down again upon the heart. I walked on, brooding and thinking, "She ought to

have known better. She might have known instinctively what I felt." I brooded until I developed in myself a sense of injury. Her high spirits only inflamed this foolish sense of injury. That night I shut myself up in my library, and went to bed late. I did so because I wanted to avoid kissing her.

'Next morning she said, with a sad little smile on her dear face, "How late you were last night. And you came to bed without kissing me!"

'"Did I?" I rejoined stupidly.

'"And you have n't kissed me this morning — yet."

'"I 'll kiss you now, if you wish."

'"You know what I wish, dear. But I don't want you to do things only because I wish them."

'I kissed her, of course; but I realized with a sense of fear that I had to force myself to do so. I felt just as I used to feel when a boy about kissing my mother. Yet all the while my heart ached and cried for her. I longed to take her into my arms, and all the more

because I saw the pain of a just reproach in her eyes. But no — I told myself that I was injured, that she had wilfully misinterpreted my motives. Good God, how mad and foolish I was! How is it men can let love, which is the most precious thing in all the world, escape them for so little — a word, a glance, a sign?

'From that day things began to alter with us. We never quarrelled — that is the vengeance of the vulgar — but the atmosphere was changed. In private I raged with myself just as I had done when a boy. Again and again I resolved to go to her and say frankly, "Dear wife, I am a brute. I am unworthy of you. Forgive me." But when the hour came to speak I was tongue-tied. I hung my head at the sight of that pain in her eyes, but I said nothing. And as the days passed, the pain seemed to widen like a shadow, and a fixed look of sorrow came into her face.

'Our means were narrow, but Alice took care that our house showed no

signs of it. There was always the carefully prepared meal, and the more I neglected her the more studious was she of my comfort. As for me, I asked no questions. I knew we were not in debt, and I took the rest for granted. I was shut up in my library most of the day now, and knew nothing of what went on in the house. I noticed, however, that at night she often seemed strangely tired. She would sometimes fall asleep over a book she was trying to read. She had grown thin and pale, but there were reasons to account for that. I can see her now, as she sat there in the lamplight, her book or work lying on her lap, her head leaning a little on one side, the small blue veins showing in her closed eyelids, the delicate fretwork of faint lines running across her forehead. . . . There were times when I looked upon her in a perfect agony of thought. I longed to fall at her feet — I could have kissed them in my abject shame of myself. But, as usual, I was tongue-tied. When she woke I would

say formally, "It 's time to go to bed." Often she would say, "I can't go yet, I must finish this sewing," and she would point to a little garment, the very sight of which ought to have softened any man's heart. I could have wept in such moments, and I would have given worlds to weep. But I felt utterly incapable of any sign, and so I would go off to bed, saying coldly, "I suppose you know best." And for an hour, and sometimes hours afterwards, she would sit there; and in the dead silence I imagined I could hear the click of her ceaseless needle, and every thrust of it was a stab in my heart.

'There is one thing I have never forgotten. She was very fond of music, and in the first weeks of our marriage she never passed an evening without playing me something I liked. One night in this sadder time I said, "You don't play much now. Can't you put your work down and play something?"

'I could see that she was pleased, and

a little thrill of the old joy shot through me.

'I opened the piano for her, and arranged the music, and as I stooped over her I softly kissed her hair. She looked up, with oh, such a look — the look of a heart hungry for love, and just then I felt that I could have given all she asked. But I know not by what malignity of circumstance I happened at that moment to catch sight of her hands. She had beautiful hands, with delicate, rosy palms and slender fingers, — I had often praised and kissed them in those earlier days. But what I saw now struck me like a blow. The joints of the fingers were slightly swollen, the palms were coarsened, and on the thumb of the left hand there was a scar like a burn.

'"What's this?" I said, pointing to the scar.

'"Oh, it's nothing. I happened to burn myself in the kitchen the other day. Since Mary left I've had to do many things myself, dear, or I don't know how the house could have gone on."

'I stared and flushed. I knew perfectly well what it all meant. I saw for one intense moment that this dear woman had made herself a drudge for my sake, — that all the comfort of the house was the fruit of her labour. I knew precisely how I ought to have felt; yes, and I did feel so. An inexpressible pity throbbed in my heart. Those ruined hands smote me with reproach. There was a sacredness in every line and scar of labour which they bore. I had kissed them once, when the skin was soft as velvet; how much more did they deserve my kisses now — those sacrificial hands that had taken up the burden of my house for me! I could have poured my heart out in torrents of love — I felt it literally raging within me like a flood. But in an instant my old perversity had mastered me. I fell into unreasoning anger. I affected to think myself disgraced because my wife had done menial work. I did not wish to see her play with hands like these. I closed the piano and turned away.

'She sat quite still, as if overwhelmed with painful astonishment, the roughened hands lying on her lap. Then she said gently, "I 'm sorry dear. I did n't want to worry you about the servants. That was why I did things myself which were not pleasant to me. It was for your sake, after all."

'But I was already at the door of the room, and could not turn back. If I had, everything might have been altered perhaps.

'I went to bed late that night, and when I entered the bedroom Alice was already asleep. She had been weeping, and a small lace-fringed handkerchief lay beside her on the pillow. One hand was under the tear-stained cheek — the other, with the scar upon it, lay on the coverlet. And I could kiss it then — fool that I was — when kisses were useless; I had not kissed it when there was healing in a kiss.

'It seemed to me, when I looked back upon it all, that this was the last time the Angel of Opportunity crossed my

path. That night he turned away from me for ever.

'I knew now that I was growing harder day by day, resist as I would. I was in the curious position of a man who sees his treasure being stolen from him, but is impotent to interfere. My eyes were open now to discern what was the life, the real life, of her I loved. I could not plead blindness. Yet my pride prevented me from confessing that I saw anything amiss.

'It was about this time that I thought fit to give a dinner-party to the Dean of Belchester, and some half a dozen clerical friends and their wives. Alice fell in with my plans without a word, though there was abundant reason why no extra burden should have been laid upon her at such a time. For two days before the party she was on her feet from morning till night, for there were a hundred things to be done that no one else could do as well. When the night came, all was completed to her satisfaction. She called me out of the library, and asked me

timidly how I liked the table. It looked beautiful, with its fresh-cut flowers, and some old silver we had borrowed of my mother. The party also was a great success; the only thing that marred my pleasure was that Alice looked pale and ate nothing.

'When the Dean was leaving, he said to me kindly, "I hope, Geake, our coming has n't been too much for your wife. She 's a sweet creature and you must take care of her. I 'm afraid she is n't over-strong."

'For the first time a vague terror seized me. What had the Dean meant? I remembered the kindly anxiety in his eyes, the warm pressure of his hand; had he meant to sympathise with me because he had perceived what I had not — a shadow of doom that was stealing over my life?

'As soon as all the guests had left, I rushed upstairs to find Alice. I opened the bedroom door softly, and found her fast asleep in a low chair before the fire. Yes, she was much changed — there

could be no doubt of it. She looked like a sleeping flower, — a flower beaten down by the wind. There was an excess in her languor which smote the heart — her whole attitude bespoke extreme exhaustion. But, as usual, my harder mood prevailed over my tenderer. I said to myself, "There 's nothing much the matter. She 's only tired. She 'll be all right to-morrow." Had I but known it, the shadow of death was already falling on her.

'That night the blow which every one but myself had feared, fell. The baby was born dead.

'In the grey light of the November morning I stood beside her, listening to her last words. On the little table beside the bed lay her worn purse, and her small account book. She had put them there, expecting to go on with her patient household management as usual during her illness. She made an effort to smile brightly when I entered the room — it was like the last touch of wan sunlight before the night falls.

'"I have no pain," she whispered. "I'm only tired — so tired. I've felt tired for ever so long.

'"Stoop down. I want to say something, dear. Do you really love me? Because . . . I've thought . . . sometimes that you did n't."

'And then that obstinate valve in the heart was wrenched open once more. I was trembling with the flood of love that swept through me. I drew her dear head to my shoulder, my tears fell upon her closed eyelids. Closed? — yes, and for ever. My tenderness had come too late.

'It all happened thirty years ago, but time makes no difference to sorrows like this. They are fools who talk of time healing grief. Grief like mine is past healing. Time widens some wounds instead of closing them.

'I have never wept since the day she died. But I've grown harder, always harder. I don't know why I've spoken now — I suppose it's only because I am lonely, lying here knowing that no one

loves me, and remembering that I was loved once. I am a very miserable old man. O, Mr. Reckitt, if ever you love a woman, don't grudge her tenderness ; men may live without it, but women cannot.'

'O, Mr. Geake,' said Reckitt in a choking voice, 'there is forgiveness of sins. God pities you, because He understands you.'

But the old man made no answer. He lay with his face to the wall, and his hand over his eyes.

Presently he said in his habitual voice, 'I think it's a little warmer. There's going to be a thaw. I shall be well again in a day or two, and you must forget that you ever came to visit me.'

## V

### THE MAN FROM LONDON

ONCE a year there was always a crowd at the old Meeting-house in Barford, for on that day Plumridge Green added its forces to the Barford congregation. The occasion was a great one. It was to hear a man from London. It was well within the bounds of possibility that quite as good a man might have been found in Belchester, but this was a hypothesis which at that time no one had ever ventured to discuss. Even to have suggested it would have roused scorn and contempt, and he who so dared would have instantly earned the reputation of a cantankerous fellow who had set himself against the traditions of the elders. On this point Barford stood firm. The man who preached the annual sermon must come from London. It did n't matter much

who he was; but come from London he must.

It was not that Barford always found unqualified pleasure in the sermon. On the contrary, it was very freely criticised when the man from London had departed, and Davy Lumsden rarely failed to explain that its imperfections were numerous and startling. But even Davy, when the committee met to select the next year's preacher, was as strong as anybody else on this primary qualification, that he must come from London.

In the days before Mr. Shannon had entirely gauged the peculiarities of his people, he had once inadvertently suggested that they might try Bunting of Belchester, whose local reputation had been of a soberly meteoric kind. But the discussion which ensued soon opened his blind eyes to the depth of his error.

Davy undertook to explain the situation, and he did so in a single sentence. The sentence was this: 'But what about the bills?'

'Well, what about them?' retorted the

minister, who in those early days still cultivated a tendency to strict logic, which he had not yet learned was a form of mental activity better suited to colleges than committees.

'Why, you can't say "Bunting of Lonnun," can you?' said Davy.

'Certainly not,' said the minister.

'Though I 've know'd such things done. The St. Colam folk did it once. They got a man from up Southminster way, to save expense, and put after his name, "From Lonnun." They thought as no one 'ud know no better, but they did. They know'd as he did n't come in by the Lonnun train, and they saw as there warn't no Lonnun label on his portmanny. An' they would n't go to hear 'un.'

'I don't understand what that has to do with the question,' said Mr. Shannon stiffly.

'Well, it 's like this,' continued Davy serenely. 'It 's Lonnun as does it. 'Tain't the man, it 's Lonnun. The biggest fool from Lonnun is more good to we than

the wisest man from Belchester. Folks do look at they bills, particerlar they Church folk, an' say, "Well, we 'll go to hear he, because he be from Lonnun." 'T aint so much like encouragin' Dissent somehow, as it 'ud be if the man come from Belchester. An' what I want to know is, "what about the bills?" How 'ud they kind o' strike the public mind, so to speak, if there warn't no word about Lonnun on 'em?'

This was a point of view not to be gainsaid. Mr. Shannon remembered that when he had preached for the first time at Barford, as a candidate, he had been announced as 'from London,' and the type in which London was printed was much larger than the type which announced his own humble name to the public. For the first time, he caught a glimpse of the main reason of his success, and it amused and mollified him.

So it was henceforth a settled principle that the annual preacher should be metropolitan. Johnny Button did indeed suggest that '*from near London*' would

look quite as well on the bills, and, as that was an elastic term, a great deal might be done to widen the field of choice. Every one knew that this was merely a sly dig at Davy, who would have done almost anything to save expense. But Davy, whose financial genius always shone supreme on committees, found no difficulty in proving that what you saved upon the railway fare you would infallibly lose in the collection. Besides which, it would lay you open to the insinuation on the part of the Church folk that Dissent no longer had in London any preachers worthy of a Barford anniversary; to say nothing of the more painful contingency that Barford might follow the example of the St. Colam folk, and ' refuse to hear 'un.'

On the April morning when the man from London was expected, there was usually a great stir of quiet expectation in the air. Mumsley, the grocer, always met him at the station, for Mumsley was the only man who had a pony-cart, and in the calculation of travelling expenses

the sixpence charged by the 'White Lion' 'bus was not included. Besides which, this was the chief adventure of the year for Mumsley, who was a man of such strong clerical proclivities that he never appeared in public without a white tie, and a coat which had an obvious cousinly relationship to the orthodox clerical garment. It was well known that Mumsley never went to the station to look after a barrel of sugar without arraying himself in semi-priestly raiment, and his proudest memory was that once, when travelling by error in a second-class carriage on the other side of Belchester, he had been mistaken for the incumbent of a neighbouring village. The man from London never failed to single him out at once as the person sent to meet him. But if he had, there could have been no corresponding error on Mumsley's part. Thirty years' practice in the art had long ago taught him precisely the sort of shiny black leather bag which might be confidently suspected of containing a sermon, a night-shirt, and

a pair of faded wool slippers, worked long ago by the ladies of an admiring congregation. Mumsley was so perfectly fitted by nature and by training for the duty of producing a good impression on the man from London, that no one would have thought of superseding him, and even Mr. Shannon, who was slow to learn the Barford niceties of etiquette, felt that it would look like an injustice to Mumsley had he offered to accompany him to the station.

But it was in the quiet manse up the Meeting-house yard that the full force of this annual excitement was felt. This was the true cyclonic centre.

For a week before the man from London came there was a turning-out of the house, so diligent, and so destructive of tranquillity, that poor Mr. Shannon used to say that he was hunted from room to room like a partridge on the mountains. For this week the will of Mrs. Shannon was supreme. There was no exemption even for the study. Papers were bundled indiscriminately into the wrong

drawers, books were thrust into the handiest places on the shelves, in direct defiance of their natural affinities, and sermons were so cleverly concealed that it was months afterwards before their whereabouts were discovered. Floors were scrubbed, linen was mended, lavender was put into the best bed, windows were polished till they shone again. It was a standing remark in Barford that Mr. Shannon was sure to visit his flock in April, if he did so at no other time.

The night before the anniversary Mr. Shannon was invited to inspect his regarnished house, and was expected to express delight in the same.

'I'm sure it looks beautiful,' Mrs. Shannon would say, as she stood with tired hands meekly folded.

'But is n't it just a little cold without a fire, dear?'

'Oh, how can you say so, John? I 'm sure it 's quite a warm night. And besides, you know we really can't have a fire lit till to-morrow. Fires make so

much dust that I should have all my work to do over again.'

This was conclusive, and the minister, whose blood had not been warmed by a week's scrubbing of floors, shivered in silence.

'Come and see the study, dear. You would n't know it, it looks so tidy.'

It did look tidy; there was no doubt of it. A perfectly clean piece of blotting paper lay upon the desk, and a perfectly clean pen lay beside it. There was an odour of borax in the air.

'But I don't see my pipe, Susan.'

'Oh, it's in the cupboard. It looks so bad for a stranger to see pipes lying about. He might suppose you were always smoking.'

'Is it a new carpet you've got, dear?'

This was an annual remark which he was expected to make; it was of the nature of a delicate compliment.

'Why, no, dear. It's only turned. The part with the hole in it, that used to be under the window, is under your

desk, where no one can see it. It's a great improvement, is n't it?'

This was a proposition to which he could yield sincere agreement. But he had different views concerning the position of the desk.

'I don't like the desk in that corner, dear. There 's no light there, and I shan't be able to write at it.'

'Yes, but you see, John, I could n't help that. That 's the place where the hole was, you know.'

A similar revolution had been effected in each room, but the controlling principle in every case appeared to be the exigencies of the carpet. It was manifest that wherever the carpet was shabby something must be put over it. Thus it happened that the couch in the drawing-room now stood immediately under the central plaster bulb that adorned the ceiling. There had been some paraffin oil spilt at this particular spot during the early part of the year. But, as Mrs. Shannon explained, it was quite customary nowadays to put the couch in the

centre of the room, instead of against the wall. Of course the Splashetts did n't do it, but then Mrs. Trevarton did; and as Mrs. Trevarton had an aunt living in London, no doubt she imported her notions direct from the latest fashions of the metropolis.

'I expect the minister's room is arranged that way in London,' she concluded. 'It will be nice for him to see that we know how to do things properly in the country.'

In the course of the evening the Splashetts and Mrs. Trevarton called. They always did so, for a reason which was very well understood but never expressed. They wished to see for themselves that the manse was in proper order. They felt that it was of the highest importance that the reputation of Barford should not suffer in the eyes of the man from London. Mrs. Trevarton was a little scornful in her survey, being conscious that her own drawing-room was vastly superior, and that by rights the man from London should have been

her guest. Dorcas Splashett contented herself with running her finger along the window-ledge, to discover any dust that might have lurked there unsuspected. She also viewed the position of the couch with cold disfavour. She had long ago observed the stain in the carpet, and was well enough aware of the reason why the couch had been torn from its natural environment against the wall.

'It 's all very well,' she observed to Priscilla, as they went home. 'But it 's a new-fangled way I don't like. Besides, when any one sits upon it, it 's ten chances to one that it 'll get pushed back, and then every one 'll see why it was put there. I 'd rather be honest any day than be found out like that. You may depend upon it Mrs. Shannon 'll be in a fever all day for fear some one 'll push that couch back.'

Mrs. Trevarton, whose discernment did not carry her so far, simply sniffed at the arrangement, seeing in it a feeble attempt to copy her own superior methods.

'It looks well enough when the couch is a good one,' she said to her husband that night; 'but when it's only a poor old rep thing like that, it's simply exposing its shabbiness. Besides, I know that one of its legs is weak, for I sat on it to find out. It never ought to be sat on, an' if it was mine I'd push it out of the way where no one 'ud think o' sitting on it.'

The approach of the man from London was heralded in a variety of ways.

When Mumsley's pony-cart appeared in the street about noon, it was generally understood that certain intelligence had been received that the man from London was really on his way. The train was not due at the junction till half-past one, and Mumsley's pony was capable of covering the distance in a quarter of an hour. But Mumsley was a man who knew the art of getting the most out of his sensations, and liked to approach the crisis of the year by deliberate stages. He also knew what was expected of him. There was always a

more or less acute suspicion in some minds that the man from London might not come after all. It was not until the pony-cart was wheeled out into the street that this suspicion was felt to be unfounded.

The pony followed the cart at about the space of half an hour. The animal was ostentatiously put into the shafts, in the full observation of the street. When all was complete, one and another would stroll up to the cart, and address Mumsley with a false air of nonchalance.

'He 's comin', then?'

'Ay, ay. He 'll just be gettin' near Belchester.'

'Do 'ee know what he 's like?'

'No, this is a new 'un. A young man, as I 'm told, but amazin' clever. They Belchester people 'll be rare an' mad if they should see him a-comin' through the station, an' think as they might ha' had him, if they 'd been sharp enough to speak for him sooner.'

'Well, they can't get him to stop now.

They 'll hev' to come to Barford if they want to hear 'im.'

'That 's so, sonny,' Mumsley would conclude complacently, as he pulled on his black kid gloves. On ordinary occasions he wore common tan driving gloves, but when he met the man from London he always wore the pair which he reserved for funerals.

At regular distances along the road to the station, children stationed themselves, and certain grown people, who might have been supposed to have something better to do, strangely discovered that it was as near to go home to dinner by the station road as any other, which was manifestly absurd to a mathematical mind.

Observations would be shouted up the road in shrill voices.

'I 've seed the smoke of her.'

'I can hear her a-rumbling.'

'She 's in the tunnel. There 's the whistle. She 's stopped now.'

After this, expectant silence fell upon the scene. It was not until the distant

grind of wheels on the gravelly road disturbed the stillness, that speech broke out again.

'I can see 'im.'

'He 's a-comin'.'

'Here he be, sure enough.'

There was a rush of feet up the lane, and one by one each little sentinel deserted his post, to join the throng that ran behind Mumsley's pony-cart. As the cart rattled over the bridge the escort grew, till it was a triumphant procession in miniature. In the cart sat a pale young man, with a shiny black leather bag upon his knees. It was a solemn moment when the cart drew up at the broad brick gateway that led to the manse and Meeting-house. It is impossible to judge accurately what a man is like by merely seeing him in a pony-cart. It is not until he stands bodily on the pavement that you can really be assured that his legs are spindly, and that his boots are town made and quite new.

Inside the manse the dinner was al-

ready waiting, for the service began in three quarters of an hour. The pale young man was led triumphantly to the room prepared for him, which he thought rather small and bare. The sweet scent of lavender was entirely wasted on him. He did not observe it, and did not know what it was. It is a long time since lavender grew in Hoxton and Hackney.

At the foot of the stair stood Mrs. Trevarton's servant, who had been borrowed for the day, holding in her hands a dish of potatoes carefully covered with a napkin, and ready to plump it on the table at the least sign of the young man's step upon the landing. It was a great disappointment to Mrs. Shannon to find that when the young man came down he declined her best dishes. He explained that he never ate before preaching. When she innocently remarked that Mr. Shannon never preached so well as after a full meal, he smiled sadly, as if in gentle deprecation of a pleasant form of barbarism, from which he was long ago emancipated. That smile was so dis-

concerting that it quite spoiled the meal. But after all you cannot expect the sermons of a man from London to be produced by the same methods as the quite ordinary sermons of so ordinary a man as Mr. Shannon. On reflecting over the matter afterwards, Mrs. Shannon felt sad to think she had been so wanting in tact as to make such a suggestion.

I think it was this pale young man who finally destroyed the tradition that only a man from London was equal to the honours of a Barford anniversary. He preached so learned a discourse on the perils of science that Davy Lumsden, whose mind was supposed to be equal to the most abstruse problems, grunted quite offensively, and at last fell into an ostentatious sleep.

There were some people, of course, who thought it very fine, on the principle that the less you understand of a thing, the more wonderful it may be supposed to be. But when the committee met next year, old Mr. Potterbee summed up the general feeling when he said:

'It 's Christ we want to hear about, for if a preacher does n't bring Christ nearer to us when he preaches, what 's the use of preaching? '

'Yes,' said Davy Lumsden, 'London 's getting too fine for we. After all, I like a man to talk our sort o' talk, howiver clever he may be.'

Since that discussion Barford has been content to go to Belchester for its annual preacher; though, as Mumsley says, 'he can't never feel the same about meetin' a man from Belchester as he would a man from London.'

The black kid gloves are never worn now. Common tan are manifestly good enough for a man from Belchester.

# VI

## A LOST IDYLL

ONCE a year Priscilla Splashett suffered from a curious trouble, for which medicine had no remedy. It always came upon her in the spring, with the song of the thrush and the flowering of the hawthorn.

In a general way the course of life at the Red House was serene almost to the point of deadness. There never was a house where the order was more perfect. The most jealous eye could not discern the least speck of dust upon the furniture; every chair had stood in the same place for forty years, and might have been imagined a sort of permanent excrescence of the floor. The meals were served to the fraction of a minute, and their character never varied. If all the clocks in Barford had suddenly stopped, the town

might have learned the time of day from observation of Dorcas Splashett, as mariners take the time by observation of the sun. Housewives, who were not afflicted with any vivid fear of dust, naturally felt the immaculate tidiness of the Red House to be something of a reproach, and occasionally made spiteful remarks upon the subject. They found a pleasure in spreading the report, that after a caller left the Red House the mat at the door was carefully shaken, and the chair which had been used was freshly polished. Mrs. Trevarton, the lawyer's wife, even went so far as to affirm that the Splashetts' cat had her feet washed every night, and had been seen going about in a pair of wool socks, similar to a baby's, after the operation, in order to avoid the least peril of footmarks on the oilcloth. But Mrs. Trevarton was not eminent for truth, and people who had seen her house did not need to be told why she said ill-natured things about the Splashetts.

The first symptom that anything was

wrong with Priscilla Splashett was that some fine spring morning she would be late for breakfast. Dorcas would look at her grimly from behind the tea-urn and say:

'Priscilla, I wonder at you.'

'I 'm sorry, Dorcas, but I ain't quite well.'

'Have you took your pills reg'lar, Priscilla?'

'It ain't pills. I think I want a change.'

'Fiddlesticks! A change, indeed! Why don't you take a walk oftener?'

'I 'm sure I've walked every day, Dorcas,' she would answer meekly. 'I've walked till I 'm tired, an' always along the same ways. One gets tired always walking the same ways. It gets kind of dull. I want to go away somewheres.'

Then she would shake her grey head dolefully, and the tears would come into her soft blue eyes. She had always been afraid of her sister since the days when Dorcas used to play at giving her

medicine, and insist upon her swallowing it, and going to bed in the middle of the afternoon, when she wanted to amuse herself in the garden. She had a timid sense that Dorcas was capable of slapping her still. For Dorcas was tall and angular, and never ailed anything; while Priscilla was delicately *petite*, with the soft curves of a child, and the faded pink of childhood still visible on her cheeks.

'It 's all sinful discontent, Priscilla,' Dorcas would retort severely. 'You 're old enough to know better, one would think. I suppose you want to go gadding off to Belchester again to your friend Ann Hobbs; though what you can see in Belchester, a nasty, stuffy, smoky place, *I* can't tell. An' Ann Hobbs always was a slut, though she has married better than might have been supposed, an' there 's never a place in her house where any one can sit down in peace, an' I 'd be sorry enough to eat anything of her cooking. But I reckon you 'll have to go.

There 's no living with you, when you 're took with this sort of fit, until you 've got your way.'

'Don't be angry, Dorcas. There 's only the two of us left, you know.'

'I 'm not angry, child. Only I wish you was a little more like me. I 've never been out of Barford half a dozen times in my life, an' I 'm sure I don't want to. I can't abide other people's houses, an' I wonder how you can.'

Priscilla would then make her escape into the garden, where she would wander up and down aimlessly, and had any one been near to observe her he would have felt a suggestion of forlorn pathos in her movements. He would have seen her, for example, pluck a spray of hawthorn and hold it to her lips with an air of guilty secrecy; and at the south corner of the garden, where the violets grew, she would stoop and gather a handful, and thrust them into her bosom, weeping quietly the while; and at the stile where the path crossed the paddock, she would sit for a long

time with clasped hands, listening to the mounting skylark. And all the time something more than the subtle passion of the spring worked in her blood, which was, of course, what no spectator would have guessed at; for old scenes were coming back, and old, fond words thrilled upon the air, and old, soft hand-pressures sent a warmth through her veins; for this was the stile where John Dartford had told her that he loved her nearly forty years before.

The last time Priscilla took this yearly journey to Belchester I saw her start, and, although I am not a person of unusual discernment, I felt that there was something curious and wonderful in the look upon her face. There was an element so sad and joyous in that look, that I always remembered it; the eyes were the eyes of a bride, but the mouth, with its wistful trembling, was the mouth of an unhappy child. A year later I came across this Ann Hobbs, with whom Priscilla always stayed in Belchester, and it was from her lips I heard Priscilla's story.

'Yes,' said Ann Hobbs, 'I 've know'd her ever since she were eighteen, for my father had a farm at Barford, and it belonged to the Splashetts, and was close to their house. All the trouble came with that there John Dartford, though 'eaven forbid as I should speak a word agenst him as were a good master to me. I was nurse in his house for nigh on two years after he married, but of course this affair of the Splashetts came before his marriage.

'In them days the two Miss Splashetts were as real beauties as you could wish to see. Dorcas, she were always tall, and had fine eyes, and walked proud; but Priscilla — Prissy, as we 'd use to call her — were the sweetest and the prettiest. John Dartford, he were a land-surveyor, and one day he came to Barford on some business, and owing to the business proving more contrairy than was expected, it happened that he stayed about six weeks, and took lodgings with us at the farm.

'I could see how it was to be from

the first. He were a fine, tall man, with big brown eyes, an' he used to talk free to mother at nights as they sat beside the fire before goin' to bed. One night it happened he came in late, and his face looked white and drawed-up, so to speak. He did n't say nothin', but after supper he went out sudden, and I could see by the way he went that he were goin' across the fields towards the Red House. It were lovely spring moonlight, and from my bedroom window I watched him cross the bridge by the brook, and go up the field to the stile, where I could see some one all in white awaiting for him. Now we had been told in Barford nigh a week before how he were going to marry Dorcas Splashett, an' we 'd thought it strange he had n't said nothing to we, seeing as he were so free in his speech as a rule. So, being but a girl, and curious, what must I do but slip a shawl over my head and go round by another path through the little wood, thinking to surprise him at the stile, and see whether it were Dorcas

he had gone to meet. I thought it would n't be like Dorcas, as were always so proud, to meet any one after such a fashion, and yet I know'd I 'd ha' gone anywheres to meet a man like John Dartford, if I loved him, an' I thought how funny it would be to see Dorcas doin' it. I went through the wood, treading tiptoe, till at last I came to the gap in the hedge close by the stile, and there stood John Dartford sure enough, but I could see at once that it was n't Dorcas as was wi' him. It were Priscilla, and he had his arm round her, and she had her head on his shoulder, an' was sobbing. I was so frighted that I slipped, and a bough broke with a crack; but bless you, they did n't hear it. They would n't ha' heard jest then, not even if Gabriel had blew his trumpet right over their heads.

'"It's been all a mistake," I heard him say. "O Priscilla, darling, what a blessing we 've found it out in time."

'"But it's not in time. It's a fortnight too late," she sobbed.

'"It's not too late," he answered almost fiercely. "I've been a fool, but I'm wise now. It's you I love, and it's you I shall always love. I can see it all now quite plain. It's you I loved from the first, and not Dorcas."

'"But you let Dorcas think you loved her, and that's what makes it too late. Oh, it breaks my heart to say it, but it *is* too late, for ever too late."

'She drew herself away from him, and stood there wringing her hands like a ghost in the moonshine.

'He seemed to shiver, as if some one had struck him a sharp blow, and then he began again, speaking low and deliberate.

'"How can it be too late?" he says. "I've only known Dorcas a month, and she can't love me all that."

'"And you've only known me a month, and yet I shall love you till I die," says she.

'"Then marry me."

'"I can't, indeed I can't. I couldn't steal something from Dorcas, even if I

wanted it ever so. I could n't ever be happy if I 'd got my happiness by making some one else miserable. And Dorcas has taken care of me ever since mother died, ever since I was a little girl."

'But he was not to be put off so easily. He argued with her, and kissed her, but it always came back to that, — "it was too late."

'"If you did n't love me well enough to marry me, why did you meet me?" he said at last. She felt it was a cruel speech, and it was her turn to shiver now. But she drew herself up, and answered very quietly:

'"Because I knew it was the only time, — the last time. It was weak of me, I know, but I could n't help it. I told myself that it was only this once. I could n't grudge myself one hour of you, one little hour. . . . Dorcas can have you all the rest of your life now, if she likes."

'"But she won't," he said, with a groan. "Don't think you are helping

Dorcas by saying no to me. You don't suppose I could ever marry Dorcas after what we've said this night, do you? It's better that one should be made miserable than two, is n't it?"

'"Not if the other two have made the one miserable by stealing her happiness," she answered, sadly. "O John, kiss me, kiss me once more, dear, and let me go. No one else will ever touch these lips. I 'll keep them pure for you till we meet in heaven, John. Perhaps things will come right there . . . will be different. . . ."

'He broke into such a cry at those words that I was fairly frighted, for I 'd never seen a man weep, and I hurried away. But right down the hill I heard that cry, and all night long it seemed to come and go like a wind at the window.

'The next day John Dartford packed up his things and went back to Belchester. The last thing he did was to walk over the meadow to the stile, where I saw him standing, as if waiting. Of course she did n't come, and I don't

suppose as he expected she would. But she 'd laid a little bunch of may-blossom and violets on the stile as a love token. He put them in his pocket, knowing very well what they meant, and strode away in the dusk.

'Well, it were a month after that, nigh on the beginning o' June, that one day Priscilla came over to the farm, and wanted to speak with me. The menfolk were all a-field, and it happened as I were alone in the house. She looked rare an' bad, poor thing; there was big black rings under her eyes, an' it seemed as though the tears had nigh washed all the pinky colour out o' her pretty cheeks, like the rain does wi' flowers. She did n't say much at first: jest looked about her sort o' frighted, and sat in the window-seat and sighed. At last she said, timid like, "So you 've lost your lodger, have you?"

'"Mr. Dartford, you might be meaning?" says I.

'"Yes," says she. "An' I 've been thinkin', Ann, that sometimes when we

have n't no room for our guests at the Red House, it might be convenient if you could let us have a bedroom here."

'I knew very well as that was all make-believe. There never had been no guests at the Red House, and never would be as long as Dorcas was the mistress. But I did n't like to see the poor thing so put to it to say what she wanted, so I said it for her.

'"Maybe," I says, "you 'd like jest to see the room as Mr. Dartford had?"

'"If you wouldn't mind," she says, with a little flush on her face.

'So she gets up, and follers me wi'out a word up the stair into the room where he 'd slept. It were jest as he left it, and the window stood open, and the smell o' the roses was being blowed in by the wind.

'She looked round sort of dazed, and said over and over agen, "So this was his room, was it?" Then she went to the window, and stood there with her back turned to me. Sudden she cries,

with a voice like a startled bird, "Ann, come here, and look at this!"

'In course I came, but at first I could n't see what she meant. She had her finger on the glass of the window, and the tears were dropping slow down her face, as if she 'd forgotten them. I looked where her finger touched the glass, and then I saw what she meant. Some one had written on the window-pane PRISCILLA, and she had seen it.

'There must have been something in my face that told her I understood, for all at once she put her arms round my neck, and began to tell me everything. She 'd never breathed a word to Dorcas, and never did.

'"O Ann," she says, "I 'm sore tempted. I do love him so, an' it 's hard to give him up. I would n't mind if Dorcas did n't love him too, but I know now that she does. She goes about the house like a ghost, and never says a word. She does n't in the least know what made him give her up, an' I dare n't tell her. If I only thought she

did n't care, I 'd go to him at once; but she does care, and we 're both being killed for love of him."

'She wept and talked a long time. At last she said, "Well, it has to be so. I 'll try an' make things happy for Dorcas, for maybe she 's hurt worse than I am. It 's not so hard to know you love some one as loves you, even if you can't have him, as it is to know you love some one who does n't love you, is it? I should like to have something that was his — some little thing. I don't think as Dorcas 'ud mind that."

'We looked round the room, but there was nothing of John Dartford's there except a withered bit of hawthorn in a pot on the mantelpiece. I s'pose it had been forgotten when the room was tidied up. So she took that, putting it careful into her bosom, an' went away.

'After a while she got her colour back, and went about much as usual. It came to be understood that there had been something between Dorcas Splashett and John Dartford, but people soon forgot

to talk of it. They took it for granted after a time that the Miss Splashetts had settled to be old maids, an' did n't wish no other. As for John Dartford, he were never seen in Barford agen, an' presently we heard as he were married.

'But every spring, as hawthorn-time came round, Priscilla used to get pale and peaky, and grew strange in her manner. She 'd sit for hours on the stile as if waiting for some one as did n't come, an' she could n't speak to you without the tears coming into her eyes.

'By this time I had left the farm, an' by chance was nurse in John Dartford's house at Belchester. After a bit I married, and settled down in Belchester, and had almost forgot about Priscilla, when one spring day the door opens and in she walks. She looked jest as she did when she come to the farm that day, and my heart went out to her, an' all the more because I was married to a man as loved me dear. I had n't any need to ask why she 'd come — leastways I did n't ask her. I made her up

a bed, an' took it for granted she'd come to stop a bit.

'The next day she says, timid-like, "Do you think you could let me see him, Ann? Not to speak to, you know — jest to see him as he passes. I don't think Dorcas 'ud object to that."

'So I told her that John Dartford's office was about a hundred yards away, and that he mostly passed my window at four in the afternoon, as he went home.

'"That will do," she said, with a sad little smile.

'At three o'clock she came in with a bit of hawthorn in her hand, and put it in a pot in the window. Then she sat down and waited. At four he came down the street. I saw her face flush, and turned away. "He 's looking older, and he does n't look happy," was all she said.

'She stayed a fortnight, and after that she came back every year at the same time. I 've heerd o' flowers as is quite content if they get jest a blink o' sun-

shine once a day, and manage to thrive on it; an' it were the same wi' her. She 'd sit and wait at the window reg'lar for her bit o' sunshine. Every year she come for more years than I care to count, more 'en thirty it must be anyways, till she were an old woman. She always did the same thing — put her bit o' hawthorn in the window an' waited. In course he never knew, an' it were best he should n't.

'The nighest she ever came to him was one day years ago, when she 'd met his little boy out in the street, and kissed him. She came in quite flushed, and told me. Then she began to weep quietly, and said, "Ah, Ann, it 's terrible to grow old, and have no little mouth to call you mother." She seemed hurt because the child had been surprised at being kissed by a strange lady in the street. She seemed to think he ought to ha' known how she had loved his father.

'But she won't come any more now. That time as you saw her start for Bel-

chester were the last time. The very day as she come John Dartford died sudden. It were foolish o' me not to tell her, but I had n't the heart to. So I let her put her bit o' hawthorn in the window as usual, and sit an' watch. I 'd altogether forgot that the funeral might pass that way, the proper way to the cemetery from Dartford's house being quite a different one. But it chanced they took a freak to carry his body past the office where he 'd worked so many years, and so the funeral came down our street. I heard the bell a-tolling, and presently the slow grind o' wheels along the road, and before I could drag her from the window the funeral were in sight.

'"Who 's that they 're berrying, Ann?" says she.

'I 'd ha' given worlds to hold my tongue, but there was something in her face as made me tell the truth.

'"It 's John Dartford," says I, speaking soft.

'I thought she would ha' fainted, or burst out crying, but she did n't. In-

stead o' that a smile came on her face, and she laughed a strange, happy sort o' laugh.

'"John Dartford's dead," says she. "Then he's mine at last. No one won't blame me for loving him now, for it's no sin to love the dead. I don't think Dorcas will object to that."'

# VII

## THE PARSIMONY OF MRS. SHANNON

FRAIL little Mrs. Shannon, the minister's wife, had always been a popular figure in Barford, but there was quite a new sentiment concerning her after her son Arthur ran away to sea. The grocer with whom she dealt put an extra half-ounce in her weekly quarter of a pound of tea, and the fortnightly washerwoman showed a reluctance to charge her legitimate day's wage. These were little matters, but they meant much. The washerwoman came nearest to their exposition, when she dropped in to see Mrs. Splown one wet spring night on her way back from the manse, and said, 'Poor thing, I'm sorry for her, I am. She ain't long for this world. She goes about like a

dazed body, she do. Grieving for that boy o' hern, I reckon.'

'All the same,' said Mrs. Splown judicially, 'I don't see as you are called on to work for nothin', Sarah Ann.'

'Bless you, I don't mind,' said Sarah Ann, with what might have been called a blush, had her rubicund countenance permitted any margin for such an extravagance. 'I ain't one o' them as looks too long at a ha'penny. Besides, I believe they Shannons is poorer than they was.'

'How's that?' asked Mrs. Splown, with curiosity.

'Oh, I don't know for certing. But I heard some o' they Meetin'ers say that Mrs. Shannon used to give to everything before that boy o' hern ran away, an' now she don't give to nothin'.'

This was true, and the fact had been duly commented on at the Meeting-house. The Sunday after Arthur ran away, Mrs. Shannon was in the big square pew as usual, but when the col-

lection was taken she looked at the plate in a confused way, and dropped her head. She sat nervously taking off her black thread gloves and pulling them on again, and then looked up with a foolish smile, which was belied by the glance of fear and agony in the eyes. The deacon who held the plate stood quite a long time at the door of her pew, not knowing what to make of it. For twenty years he had held the plate to this frail little woman, and had never been refused. It was as though some fundamental law of the universe had gone wrong and refused to work. A great deal may happen in a minute — hearts have broken in even less time: and during that dreadful minute the lonely woman in the big pew seemed visibly to shrink and dwindle. Her face, which at first had flushed painfully, turned to pale wax, on which every line and wrinkle, and some of the blue veins knotted round the temples, stood out with the distinctness of an etching. Then she whispered faintly,

'Not to-day,' and the deacon turned away with wonder written on his brow. It was remarked that when the hymn was sung the minister's wife did not stand up. She sat in the same crushed attitude in the corner of the big pew.

During that week it somehow got about that when Miss Splashett had called at the manse to collect the usual subscription for a certain 'society,' she had been refused, to her painful astonishment. She gave an account of the matter to her sister the same afternoon, and the two old ladies, as they sat over their tea, discussed the question from every point of view.

'I know the minister is n't as well off as he was,' she said, 'for things have gone down a little at the chapel — but I never knew Mrs. Shannon refuse to give before. She's always been most generous — indeed I wonder how she's done it. But all at once to decline giving anything — it's most strange, most strange, my dear.'

'Did n't she explain?' asked Priscilla.

'Not a word. Besides, her manner was so curious. She stammered, and only spoke in whispers. Generally she 's always been prepared with the money, and has said, with a smile, "You see, I 've not forgotten. I knew you would come to-day, and I like to keep the Lord's money ready." But this afternoon she seemed quite frightened to see me. She stood all the time, and kept fidgeting with her hands, and did n't seem to know what she was saying. It 's my belief she's going to have a stroke or something; and she looks years older the last week or two.'

Priscilla shook her head sadly. She was the younger sister, and had not yet outlived sentiment. She sometimes had dreams of quite astonishing sweetness, in which she tasted the elusive and denied bliss of motherhood, and sighed wistfully over the thought of how different life might have been if she had married John Dartford. But that was an old story, and one that could never be discussed with her sister Dorcas. Yet

there was a bitter sweetness in the thought that though John Dartford had been engaged to Dorcas, it was Priscilla whom he had loved; and deep in the heart of this white-haired woman there burned the embers of this first and only passion. There were times still, when as these two solitary women sat before the fire on winter nights, the spirit of John Dartford came between them, and Priscilla's gentle heart burned with soft resentment against the elder sister, who had not loved her lover well enough to keep him, but had made it impossible for him to claim the woman who would have loved him to the death. Poor, sad, aged women, who hear the wind of regret blowing round the world, and keep in the heart the faded rose-leaves of a first passion, — I wonder if there are any women who deserve a larger share of the world's pity than these!

Priscilla was full of these poignant memories while her sister was talking of the curious conduct of Mrs. Shannon. Presently she said gently, 'You may

depend upon it, the poor thing 's broken down by the conduct of Arthur. Perhaps we don't quite understand how a mother feels things.'

'I don't see what that has to do with it, Priscilla,' Dorcas retorted sharply. 'There 's no sense in giving up doing your duty because your son has n't turned out well. It 's like trying to pay God out because things are n't as you wish 'em. And as for feeling like a mother, that 's what neither of us knows anything about, and don't want to, and I 'm surprised at your indelicacy in naming it. I 'm quite sure if you was to die to-morrow, Priscilla, *I* should n't withdraw my subscriptions to things, and for my part I don't see any sense in such conduct. Not but what I 'm sorry for her,' she continued, 'and I intend paying her subscription for her, without saying anything. But all the same, I 'm puzzled to know what it all means.'

In the course of the next month a good many people shared the puzzle,

and in the social circles of the Meeting-house it was constantly discussed. Many eyes were fixed upon the frail little woman in the big pew, especially when the collection came. After that first memorable Sunday she did not permit the plate to pass, but she put her coin into it with a gesture that was eloquent of shame. The old deacon who held the plate knew the reason of her shame, but he was magnanimous enough to keep his own counsel. He saw that the coin so stealthily slipped into the plate by that trembling hand was no longer silver, but copper. The people in the next pew might have seen it also, had he not fixed his eyes upon them with so ferocious a stare that they were forced to turn theirs away. But if such an episode as this could be concealed, it was obviously impossible to conceal the fact that Mrs. Shannon had not paid her yearly subscriptions to some half a dozen 'societies,' and the discussion of this theme was general.

There was one person who might have been expected to know all about it; but, as a matter of fact, the minister knew less than anybody else. From the commencement of his married life he had been accustomed to leave the entire management of his slender finances in the hands of his wife. Sometimes he would say, 'I hope, Susan, you 're not giving away too much?' Whereupon she would retort brightly, 'You leave all that to me, John. I can manage.' She did manage, by many shifts and self-denials, which were known only to herself. Now and then the minister would have an illuminated moment, when he thought that he discovered in an apparently new dress a suspicious resemblance to an old one. But the woman who cannot hoodwink a man on such a subject is manifestly unworthy of her sex. The most difficult moments were those in which he had arrived at a passing conviction that his wife was not as well dressed as the average of the congregation.

'I don't like to see you shabby, Susan, and that dress *is* shabby.'

'Why, how can it be shabby? I've only had it two years.'

'But everybody has new dresses in the spring. I noticed several in the chapel this morning. Mrs. Trevarton's for one.'

'O John, John, how can you be so foolish? Why, I know that dress of Mrs. Trevarton's well enough. It 's only been turned, dear, and to my perfect knowledge she 's had it four years. So that 's all you know.'

'Well, I believe yours has been turned, too.'

'Of course it has, but only once, dear, and Mrs. Trevarton's has been turned twice. Now don't you worry. I 've got all the clothes I want. And besides, there 's my wedding dress, which is as good as new still. I 'll put it on again some day, if you 're good and don't worry.'

In those days Susan Shannon had a sweet bird-like trick of putting her head

on one side when engaged in controversy, which gave her an air of amiable perkiness. Had any one risen very early on some magical May morning, and seen her gravely hopping over a dewy lawn, uttering a soft lyrical flute-note for pure joy of the dawn, he would scarcely have been surprised. John Shannon in his earlier years rather liked to provoke this bird-like semblance. He found it pretty, and a trifle pathetic.

But as time wore away John Shannon had seen less and less of what went on around him. I honestly believe that he had not noticed the least change in his wife for close on thirty years. The image of the girl he had loved and won remained so steadfast and firm of outline in his mind, that he was unconscious of any defacement worked by the passing of the years. She was still to him young and pretty, and for his eyes there were neither faded cheeks, nor grey hairs, nor deep lines graved by the sure hand of that melancholy artist we call Sorrow.

In this time of grief it was natural that his eyes should be turned within more resolutely than ever. His thoughts brooded so constantly over his lost son, that all external things seemed to have melted away into dim, unreal perspective. Once or twice, indeed, it did occur to him that his table was more scantily furnished than usual, and he was conscious of a cold breath of parsimony that had stolen through his house. It puzzled him a little; and, lifting his eyes to the worn face of his wife, for the fraction of a second he almost saw what others saw in it. A thrill of fear shook his heart, but the impression was quite momentary. The mask which his imagination had created had merely slipped away for an instant from the brow of tragic reality; swiftly and silently it was readjusted, and once more before him there sat the bride of his youth. Nevertheless he was frightened, and he began to watch his wife with innocent stealth. It was her necessity to be economical, he thought, but it was hardly in her

nature to be parsimonious. She was aware of his thought, and said with a gesture of deprecation, 'We don't need so much now Arthur 's gone.' They looked at one another and said nothing. The very name of the prodigal was like the loud clanging of a knell in their hearts. It at once withdrew attention from all other thoughts.

It was perhaps a month later that the minister went to bed early one night, leaving Mrs. Shannon at work in the little sitting-room. He dropped asleep at once, and slept soundly for some hours. When he woke he stretched out his arm in the darkness, and was surprised to find his wife had not come to bed. At that moment he heard a distant clock chime two.

It was a moonless night in June, and the room was in entire darkness. An immense loneliness weighed upon him. His heart cried for his son, and there came to him the vivid picture of how long years before a cradle had stood beside the bed, and a small hand had

often been stretched out to find his in the early dawn. Instinctively he put out his hand, and withdrew it as though he had thrust it into a flame. The darkness was no longer lonely; it closed upon him like a thing alive, — a crowd of moments, the thronging forms of departed joys and hopes. So acute was this sense of the living pressure of the darkness, that he sprang out of bed with a cry of pain. The action broke the spell, and his mind returned to its first impression of surprise at the absence of his wife.

Slipping on his clothes, he went down the stair with silent feet. He pushed open the door of the sitting-room noiselessly, and looked in. There sat Susan Shannon, hard at work beside a table covered with innumerable clippings of coloured cloth. She was apparently engaged in manufacturing a hearth-rug of the kind often seen in farm parlours. Each bit of cloth was carefully knotted with strong twine upon an oblong of rough canvas, and under her skilful

touch a pattern of coloured wheels and crosses was growing into shape. The work was rough and hard; as her palms were turned slightly upward after knotting the twine, he could see the redness of rising blisters on them. From time to time she put her head on one side, critically examining her work. While he looked, he saw her carefully fold up the rug, and heard her sigh deeply. The rug was put away in an oaken chest, with an air of the utmost secrecy. John Shannon's tongue was tied; he was too amazed to speak. Noiselessly he stole upstairs again, and, once there, could not find the courage to mention the strange sight he had seen.

But a month later his amazement was greatly increased when he saw what seemed to be this very rug hanging in a shop-window at Belchester, marked at twenty-five shillings. The sudden effort of perception in a man usually unobservant is often singularly acute; it is the quickening of a dormant faculty into special and spasmodic intensity. John

Shannon was sure he knew that rug. The gaudy wheels and crosses on the black background were as familiar as his own hand. The next afternoon he made pretence of indisposition, that he might stay at home while his wife went out. As soon as the house was still he found the key of the oaken chest, and unlocked it with trembling hands. It was as he thought; another partly completed rug was concealed in it. He unrolled it, eyeing it critically. He must fix this pattern in his mind, he must. The one business of his life must be to penetrate this strange mystery. Was it possible his wife was deliberately setting herself to earn money by such means as this? And if so, why? His mind groped vainly for the least clue. But he would be sure this time. Taking a pair of scissors, he carefully snipped away three tags of yellow cloth in the very centre of the rug. It was impossible that any one but himself could perceive the difference. But he would know; he would know that rug any-

where after this. He felt for a moment painfully proud of his acuteness. Then he carefully replaced the rug, and locked the chest. He sighed heavily in doing so, as his wife had done.

It was now the end of June, and in the second week of July the minister took his annual holiday. For the first time in his life he went alone. Mrs. Shannon had pleaded for a wee's perfect rest in her own house, saying that she could rest nowhere so completely. At the end of the week she would join him at Barcombe.

John Shannon left her with reluctant heart; he perhaps had some forewarning of the blow that was impending. But she smiled brightly on him as he went.

'I shall do very well, dear,' she said. 'I am only a little more tired than usual this year. I shall be all right by the end of the week.'

He did not notice her extreme and growing frailty. The fair image of the bride still stood between him and her, and his eyes were holden that he should

not see the melancholy attenuation of that real woman, who drooped under his eyes like a withered flower. Nor did he say a word of that painful curiosity which had eaten its way into his heart. He felt afraid to speak of it. But, as he left her, he did one significant thing which marked the current of his thoughts. He took her right hand in his, and lifted it up, so that the roughened palm was exposed. He surveyed it attentively for an instant, and his lips moved, as though he wished to speak. Then he bowed his head reverently and kissed it.

No sooner had he gone than Susan Shannon unlocked the oaken chest, and began to work. Through the long day, and far into the night, those patient, ceaseless hands toiled on. The next day it was the same, and the next, and the next. She seemed to grow thinner and older each hour; it was as though her spirit were drained out of her by the monstrous thing that lay upon her knees. She scarcely stopped now to eat or

drink. She felt no pain from the sharp twine which had cut her fingers till they bled. The whole world swam before her as a maze of coloured wheels and crosses. She feared her eyes were failing her, but she did not care if they only lasted till her work was done. She was dying, — she knew it now. But she would not die till the Lord's debt had been paid . . . till. . . . There was another thought, but that she did not dare to mention. It found expression only in one sigh, deep and oft-recurring, that came and went round her like a wind as she worked, — 'O my boy, my boy, how could you have done it?'

On Friday night her work was all done. The last of these hideous rugs was finished, and safely sent to Belchester. She cleared away all the shreds, and burned them. On Saturday the payment of her work arrived. It was in gold, and was sent as she had requested by special messenger from Belchester. The youth who brought

the money whistled as he went out at the door. He was half frightened by what he had seen within, and whistled to keep up his courage.

During the morning she employed herself in writing several notes. Each was addressed to the secretary of some society, and contained half a sovereign. She counted up what was left of her earnings, and added some money which she had saved from her housekeeping expenses. This she put in the drawer beside her bed and locked the drawer.

She was ready now to meet her husband, but she knew that she would never join him at Barcombe. Once more a frightful sensation of weakness overcame her; once more the world swam away from her in an intricate revolving pattern of blazing wheels and crosses. She wrote with difficulty a telegram begging him to come to her, and got the chapel-keeper to take it to the office. Then she carefully arrayed herself in her wedding-dress, and lay down upon the bed to rest. She

was waiting for the bridegroom. She heard bells ringing in her brain, heard solemn words spoken over her, as if the clouds spoke, . . . and the air was lilac-scented, and spring danced with sun-winged feet upon the water, and the wind chanted one glad monotonous note, a cuckoo-word, eternally reiterated, 'Behold, the Bridegroom cometh.' Then the darkness rolled over her like a sea. 'My husband, my boy,' she whispered, as the wave engulfed her.

It was so John Shannon found her that night when he came home from Barcombe — unconscious, worn out, arrayed in her wedding-dress — a woman who had already passed far into the mortal shadow. And his eyes were no longer holden; he knew he looked upon the bride of death.

# VIII

## THE MONEY IN THE DRAWER

IT was Davy Lumsden who was the first to catch sight of Arthur Shannon on the day when he came home, and he communicated his discovery to Johnny Button.

The autumn rains had begun, and Davy was absorbed in thinking out a new architectural design for his pigsty, when he happened to look over the hedge of his garden, and saw the figure of a young man slinking in and out among the trees that grew on the south side of Plumridge Green. Coming out an hour later, when the afternoon had darkened, he was surprised to find the figure still standing immobile under the trees. The last watery burst of sunset light, striking across the common, emphasised the forlornness of this unusual

traveller. The rain shone upon his tattered mackintosh coat, and his blue cloth cap was drawn down close over his eyes. He stood as one utterly forsaken, equally without hope or aim, his arms folded, his eyes fixed upon the inhospitable skies. As the light struck upon him, Davy discerned the close-curling rings of light hair beneath the cloth cap, and was dimly aware of something familiar in the figure.

'He don't look like a tramp, and he don't look like a tourist,' said Davy. 'That cap 's most like a sailor's by what I can make out. But 't ain't like a sailor to stand all' day under them trees a-shelterin' from a squeeze o' rain. I 'm a-goin' over to see what 't is he wants.'

Davy lit his pipe, and clanged his garden gate behind him. But at the sound of the shut gate the figure beneath the trees at once made off, and Davy, watching him, said, 'Well, I 'm blest if that ain't young Shannon.'

An hour later, Johnny Button, saunter-

ing serenely through the rain with an empty sack drawn round his shoulders, stopped at Davy's gate.

'Yes, I seed 'en,' said Johnny, in reply to Davy's inquiry, 'an' pretty bad he looked. His face were all whisht an' white, and he went lame on one foot. His face fair frighted me, it were that miserable; it were like the face o' one what had looked on bad sights, an' could n't forget 'em.'

'Did 'ee speak to 'en, Johnny?'

'I tried to,' said Johnny. 'I 'd a mind to ask 'en to come home along, an' get warmed up wi' a cup o' tea, but he just waved me away wi' his hand, an' made off like one possessed. Reminded me o' the madman among the tombs, he did.'

'Ah, you may be sure he hev done somethin' wrong to be actin' like that,' said Davy. ''T is queer 'ow they sons o' ministers do moastly turn out so bad. I doubt 't is the case o' Eli an' Phineas over agen.'

'I did n't feel I 'd no call to think

that way,' said Johnny. 'I was jest sorry for 'en, an' wishin' I could help 'en a bit.'

In the meantime the prodigal had limped his way to the crest of the hill above Barford. He was wet through, and had eaten nothing since the early morning. At the entrance to the town was a little shop, where mixed comestibles, dear to the tastes of boyhood, were sold. As a child he had often spent his pennies there, and his feet halted by a kind of instinct at its threshold. Presently he entered, and bought a handful of biscuits. It was a great relief to find that during the months he had been away the shop had changed hands, and the bustling motherly woman behind the counter did not know him. He saw in the little room behind the shop a fire burning brightly, and children gathered round the hearth, and he groaned. They were roasting apples at the fire, and a poignant memory of his own lost childhood came back to him with the fragrance of the apples.

'You look rare an' bad, young man,' said the woman. 'Hev you come far?'

'I have come from the far country,' he replied sadly.

The woman was puzzled at his speech, and looked at him anxiously. Then she stepped hastily into the room behind the shop, and returned, bringing him a roasted apple. 'Eat it up, my sonny; 't will do 'ee good,' she said. But he, seeing the children watching him wide-eyed in the doorway, turned and fled. They seemed to him a hostile jury about to deliver a verdict against him, and he trembled before their astonished innocence.

In the grey gloaming he stole into the town like a shadow. His whole past life marched with him as he walked; it was a spectral army, marching with arms reversed, to the sound of mournful music. He was Arthur Shannon, he told himself, the minister's son; he had always been clever; he was cut out for success — every one had said so — and he could not understand how this immense calam-

ity had overtaken him, how he came to be marching in this rabble army of defeat. He had meant to take all the bright and good things of the world as a natural right, certainly by an easy conquest; and in his ears there sounded only these melancholy drums, derisive, eloquent of disaster. He had always meant to be good,— he would swear he had; and here he was, Arthur Shannon, the minister's son, carrying his black heart through the streets where he was born. There was something monstrous in it all, intolerable, unjust. It was not fair that he should be punished so heavily. He felt sure that he would never have punished any one else after this fashion. He would have let them off — it was the duty of the world to let people off.

But his protest died upon his lips when he remembered what he had done, and his passion of revolt whimpered in him like a beaten cur. For the moment he had squared his shoulders, for he had felt indignant with destiny; now they fell forward again, and he walked as one

thoroughly cowed. The hot tears rushed into his eyes and half blinded him. He was conscious only of his misery, a misery like the sea, immense and mournful, to which none could set a bound.

He was now close to Potterbee's house, and he remembered how many times he had vanquished Paul Potterbee in debate, how they had read the same books, and dreamed the same dreams, and sworn to love one another as Jonathan and David did. He looked hard at the house, but there was no light in any window, and he felt the darkness of the house like a rebuke, a reproach, a purposed inhospitality. There was something in the blankness of its aspect that chilled him to the bone. The cold rain was falling faster now, and the wind was rising.

A door opened a little further up the street, and a gush of warm light shot forth. A youth of about his own age came out, carefully wrapped up against the weather. He heard the youth's cheery 'good-night' as he crossed the threshold, and saw him stoop his head

to an old woman who put her hands on his shoulders and kissed him.

'Oh, my mother!' he half sobbed. 'No one will ever kiss me again like that!'

He began to wonder vaguely who this youth was, and where he was going. He had a mind to run after him, and warn him. He felt quite sure of the very words that he would use. He saw himself leading back this truant son in triumph, restoring him to his mother. . . . It was some moments before he recognised the stupidity of his ideas. Then he said bitterly, 'But no one ever does stop a man who has set his face toward the dark; no one ever does know what the far country's like till he's got there.'

He moved away slowly, with dragging feet. Presently he came to the low wall of the churchyard. Here he paused again, leaning wearily against the wall. The wooden gate swung and rattled in the wind and the noise suggested a new idea to his troubled mind. He entered

the graveyard stealthily, closing the gate behind him. But if he had had any intention of finding his mother's grave, the gathering darkness had now made such a search impossible. Nevertheless he sought patiently for some minutes, stumbling in the wet grass, and stooping down from time to time over some mound of new-turned earth. There were three fresh graves — so much he could discern — but there was not a sign to show him under which of these hideous earthen barriers slept his mother's face. He had a vague notion of passing the night there. It struck him that to die upon his mother's grave was the one thing required of him — he had read of such things in books. People would find him there in the morning, and they would look at him mercifully, knowing he had expiated all his faults. 'Oh, my mother,' he sobbed again; and the rising wind roaring in the great elms caught his voice up, and made a mockery of it, and the rain beat down with a new violence. When the

squall passed he heard the water trickling in little rivulets down the slope of the three new-made graves.

A new thought came to him — he would go to the Red House and see the Splashetts. Priscilla Splashett had always been kind to him. It would be easier to face his father if he had already looked upon some human face he knew, and seen pity in it.

He turned into a back lane behind the church, in order to avoid the town, and made his way to the Red House. At the end of the lane he came out upon the main road, directly opposite the big iron gates of the Red House. He entered, and knocked timidly at the door. A maid opened the door, and tossed her head when he asked to see Miss Priscilla. She went to the dining-room, and he could overhear all that was said.

'Who is it?' said the sharp voice of Dorcas.

'He looks like a tramp, mem,' said the girl.

'Goodness! You surely hav' n't asked him in a-trapesin' his wet feet over the hall?'

'No, mem. He 's in the porch.'

'Well, give him a shilling, and tell him to go away. I dare say he 's no good, but on a night like this you can't turn him away without giving him something.'

'Perhaps he is n't begging,' said the soft voice of Priscilla. 'He may be some one in sorrow. Let me go and see.' . . .

But he waited to hear no more. A wave of intolerable shame swept over him. There was only one place where such misery as his could claim asylum, only one door at which he would not knock in vain. He would go home at once.

He ran down the gravelled path into the main road, and walked rapidly up the High Street, till he came to the broad archway within which stood the Meeting-house, and the low red-brick manse, and the pebbled quadrangle

with the great oak-tree, which he knew so well. The lamp which hung in the archway was not lit, for there was no meeting in the chapel that night. He felt this to be fortunate; he would meet no one, he would not be recognised. And yet that unlit lamp pained him like an extinguished hope.

Once within the archway, his resolution failed him utterly. For months he had foreseen and forefelt this hour, but he had never imagined how bitter it would be. Perhaps after all it would be better if he went away. It would be a less pain to his father to think him dead than to see him thus. He crept slowly to the window that opened on the small living-room, and stood there a long time irresolute. The blind was not drawn, and looking in, he saw the firelight playing on the polish of the mahogany chairs, and the furniture with which he had been familiar from a child. All was as he had left it; it was as though he had dreamed an evil dream of wretchedness and hunger, and all that

he had suffered was unreal. This room was the one real thing in the universe, the rest a whirling phantasm. This stood steadfast, unalterable; the rest heaved and melted like a mist. And yet, as he looked with hungry eyes, he saw that this room was after all not quite as he left it. One thing he missed — his mother's work-basket. It had always stood on the small round table in the recess of the window. It was not there now.

He might have stood there half the night in miserable retrospect, but just then the door opened, and his father came out. Before the old man could utter even a cry of astonishment, the boy was in his arms. Both were weeping as they passed into the house.

In that firelit room they sat and talked for hours, till the fire burned low, and they could scarcely see each other's faces. But it was not until near midnight, as they were going to bed, that the last bitter drop of penitence was wrung out of the boy's heart.

'Did mother tell you anything about me before she died? Did she say anything?'

'She died in silence, my son. But the night before she died she prayed for you, and said she should meet you some day in heaven.'

There was a moment of embarrassed silence. The father, standing with the bedroom candle in his hand, saw by its light that the boy's eyes had dropped, and that his face had grown paler.

'We won't talk of it any more, my son. It's all over now, and God has brought you back safe and sound.'

'But there 's something I must talk of, father — something I hav' n't told you. May I see . . . see the room where mother died?'

The old man's face contracted in sudden pain. He had never entered that room since the coffin passed out of it. But it was only natural, he thought, that Arthur should wish to see it. God had brought his son back; perhaps it was God's will that that sacred room of

death should be the shrine where the boy's vows of penitence should be divinely sealed.

Yet he could not forbear shuddering as he entered it. The coldness of the dead was in it still. It had the dismal orderliness of the room that is swept and garnished, because the spirit of life has passed out of it for ever. The pillowless bed yawned stark and flat, the dressing-table was bare. On the wooden chair beside the bed was a Bible, and on the Bible the little book of 'Daily Meditations' which the dead woman had used for half a century.

Arthur stood on tiptoe, gazing, and shivered in the frozen air. Then, with sudden resolve, he walked across the room to the chest of drawers which stood beside the window. He tried to open the top drawer, but it was locked. He looked helplessly at his father, who watched him with growing concern.

'I want this opened,' he whispered hoarsely. 'There 's something in it . . .

something I must see. Have you never opened it, father?'

'I could n't. I had n't the heart to. Come away, my son.'

He stood fumbling in his pocket. Then he said, with a deep sigh, 'Stay, here 's the key. But wait till to-morrow, then we 'll open it together.'

'No, father, it must be to-night — now.'

The key was already in the lock. 'Did mother lock it after I went away?' said the boy.

'I don't know. It was *her* drawer — I never saw it open. Why do you ask?'

'I thought she might. There would have been reasons. It never used to be locked before I went away.'

An inexplicable misgiving seized the old minister. A sort of dreadful illumination passed over his mind. Fragmentary observations and intuitions began to piece themselves together in his thoughts.

He remembered his wife's midnight toil, his conviction that it was under-

taken as a means of raising money, her air of strange secrecy, and her curious parsimony. He remembered that none of these things had happened till Arthur went away. There came back to his mind certain softened hints of long-deferred subscriptions suddenly paid — paid just before her death. And now there was the mystery of the locked drawer. It had never been locked until after Arthur went away. Arthur himself had said that. There was the sweat of great terror on his brow. His teeth chattered in his head. He looked fearfully at his son.

But Arthur Shannon was now standing quite still, with agony and triumph written on his face. He had unlocked the drawer, he stood before it awe-struck. In his hand he held his mother's faded leather purse, and from it he had taken five sovereigns, which he placed upon the bed. From the purse he had also taken a piece of folded paper, on which was written, 'The Lord's money,' in his mother's delicate handwriting.

He laid the piece of paper beside the gold, and falling on his knees at the bedside, burst into an agony of tears.

'My son, my son,' gasped the old man. But his mouth was dry, a fire burned in his throat, no other word would come.

The boy looked up at his voice, and that vision of his father's face decided him. How could he break his father's heart by telling him he had been a thief? He knew now that his mother had kept the secret of his sin. She had gone to the grave with it locked up in her heart. She had paid back, by what means he knew not, all that he had taken away on that dreadful day when he had robbed her of the 'Lord's money.' Surely the Lord would not be hard with him, if he left that sin unconfessed; surely it was his mother's hand that was even now laid upon his lips, and her voice which said, 'For my sake, be silent. I alone know the sin. For my sake, spare your father.'

There is a sin that is not unto death,

and the silence of Arthur Shannon was such a sin.

'Father,' said the boy, 'kneel down and pray with me. I . . . I think mother wants you to.'

The old man knelt and prayed long and earnestly, wrestling for the soul of his son, till the Angel of the Dawn shook glimmering wings of gold against the window. That hideous terror which had rent his heart passed out upon the passion of his prayer. It vanished like a blur of breath from the mirror of his simple nature, and left no stain behind. He prayed with his hand upon the boy's bowed head, remembering only the child who had stammered at his knee, and slept within his arms. And over both there leaned unseen a spirit brighter than the Angel of the Dawn, — the spirit of a woman who knew she had not died in vain.

# IX

## POTTERBEE'S FIRST SERMON

IT was always remembered in Barford that when the Squire lay dying he had sent for Potterbee to pray with him, and had said to him, 'You dear little man, I believe I can die easy now.'

Some men might have been puffed up at such a speech, and there was certainly no other man in Barford to whom public opinion would not have grudged the honour of such a compliment; but every one felt that Potterbee had fairly earned it. He was, in truth, a 'dear little man.' He came of a long ancestry of Quakers, and although he had become, by force of circumstance, a deacon at the Meeting-house, he never lost the Quaker mould. He usually wore a high white cravat, and a black coat of antiquated cut. His hair was of a silvery whiteness, and his face had the

peace of quiet waters in a sunny pool. He lived in a small house at the end of the High Street, and behind it stretched a long garden full of old-fashioned flowers. He had means of his own, although they were very much less than was generally supposed, and had he cared to lead an idle life, there was no one to say him nay. But Potterbee was one of those men who are visibly ordained for the comfort of the world, and he had long ago recognised his mission. Every morning, on the stroke of ten, he went down the street to visit the sick, and there was no day when he did not carry a little of his sunshine into some place of darkness. I, for one, can bear witness that, when I first made acquaintance with death, I found no peace till Potterbee prayed in that dark room where the coffin stood; I felt as though I had seen an angel sitting in the tomb when he finished.

Now the Potterbees had only one son, and it was he whose first sermon occasioned so much sensation. Paul Potter-

bee was a shy and retiring youth, and from his birth his parents had prayed that he might become a minister. It is to be feared that on many a dull Sunday at the Meeting-house, when old Mr. Shannon was not quite at his best, the two innocent old people in the big corner pew had wandering thoughts, through which there ran like a bright thread the fancy of how Paul would look in the pulpit. Many times Rachel Potterbee would say to her husband, 'I begin to fear it is not the Lord's will, William.' But he would reply, 'Well, we can pray about it, Rachel,' and Paul never knew how often at dead of night these two old folks knelt in the room next to his, holding one another's hands, and praying softly that it might please the Lord to make their boy His messenger.

At length, on one happy spring morning, Paul, who was now eighteen, with many blushes told his father that he would like to preach. The old man kissed him on the forehead, and went

out into the garden quite pale with joy. Rachel saw him standing with clasped hands beside the bed of yellow jonquils near the blossoming apple-tree, and with a swift divination of what had happened ran out to him with a face as pale as his own. 'Is it Paul?' she whispered, and the shining in the old man's eyes gave her eloquent reply. They fell back, as they always did in moments of great excitement, into the sweet Quaker tongue, 'the single language,' as it is called, and began to 'thee' and 'thou' one another in soft voices. Paul, looking out of the window of the little room he called his study, saw them, and never forgot the sight. Years afterwards, when he got adrift on strange seas of doubt for a time, the memory of that spring morning came back to him like a holy vision, and it held within it the light by which he found his way back to faith. Men often forget many things that learned theologians teach them, but they never forget that their parents knew what the gate of heaven meant.

But, if the truth were told, Paul on that morning had only the vaguest ideas of what preaching meant. He had but lately found his tongue in the debates of 'the Society' at the Meeting-house, and was somewhat intoxicated with the pleasure of his newly discovered gift. The fact was, his desire to preach owed a good deal to the conviction that he was capable of doing quite as well as Mr. Shannon, who had begun to fail lately. It is not an unusual thing for a shy youth to hide under his diffidence a quite preposterous pride. Paul had lately read by stealth certain modern books which sounded quite a new note, — a note not found in any of the solid and respectable volumes on old Mr. Potterbee's shelves. He felt a conviction that he was born to grapple with great problems. He had attentively surveyed his forehead in the glass, and was inclined to argue from its contour the possession of genius. He was perfectly aware of the hopes with which his parents regarded him, although he

was quite incapable of measuring the profound deeps of spirituality from which they sprung. On that April morning, when he saw his parents under the blossoming apple-tree, his first sermon lay completed on his desk. He knew every word of it by heart. It was an elaborate vindication of the ways of God with men, founded on the saying of Elihu that 'men see not the bright light that is in the clouds.'

The place where aspirants for pulpit honours were accustomed to exercise their gifts was a small red-brick chapel on the edge of a common, that went by the name of Plumridge Green. It lay about three miles to the south of Barford, and its people were notorious for the bluntness of their speech. Many a candidate for the pulpit had buried his hopes on Plumridge Green, to the unfeigned satisfaction of its inhabitants, who made light of all genius that came from Barford. Even Mr. Shannon rather dreaded the impassive faces of a Plumridge audience. There were half a

dozen old men who used to sit near one another in the front pews, and they had a most disconcerting habit of pretending to be asleep, which might have imposed upon a person not observant enough to remark that at any error of doctrine twelve white eyebrows were simultaneously lifted, in what seemed like patient scorn. It was at Plumridge Green that young Paul Potterbee preached his first sermon.

It was a solemn moment when he left the small house in the High Street to go upon his momentous journey.

'Oh, my dear boy, preach Christ,' said his mother, as she drew him to her breast and kissed him. 'There 's nothing else worth preaching.'

It made him a little uncomfortable, for he knew that there was nothing in his sermon about Christ. His father walked with him a mile upon the road, and would have liked to have gone with him all the way, but dared not. They parted at the point where the road strikes the open moor, and the dear old

man stood bare-headed in the spring wind, and prayed for Paul. At that moment Paul felt the strongest impulse to turn back. He was oppressed by a miserable sense that after all he had nothing to say.

'Dear Lord, be good to my boy,' pleaded the old man. 'Give him utterance and knowledge. Help him to preach the grace and truth of Thy Son, our Saviour.'

He took his son's hand, and asked timidly what text he was going to take. Paul told him with a blush. He dared not tell him that he had learned his sermon by heart.

'Yes, yes,' the old man replied. 'It's a good text. I can read God's truth in it. But don't forget that the only true light in the cloud is the bright and Morning Star. Oh, my dear boy, preach Christ.'

There was no one near, and he kissed the youth. At that moment each had an unspoken misgiving in his heart. The old man was afraid that Paul had

taken a wrong text, and Paul had begun to doubt the excellence of his elaborate sermon.

'Won't you come with me, father?' said Paul, with a sudden rush of affection. There was entreaty in his voice too, for he was growing afraid of the ordeal. He had never before realised that it is a terrible thing to preach.

'I can't, I dare not,' said the old man. 'But I won't go home. I shall walk up and down the road and pray for you. You'll find me waiting for you here when you come back.'

He felt in his pocket, and drew from it a packet of jujubes, which he solemnly placed in Paul's hand.

'Your mother forgot to give them to you. They're good for the voice, I believe.'

It sounded oddly enough, but neither recognised the oddity. It was a relief to both to smile with simple human kindliness just then.

'And you must wrap your throat up after preaching. Have you got your

silk neckerchief ? Your mother was very particular about that.'

Paul produced it, and there were tears in his eyes as he said, 'Mother 's always thinking of me, is n't she? I hope she 'll pray for me.'

'We shall both be praying for you, my son. We prayed for this night eighteen years ago when you were born.'

Paul moved slowly away, looking back from time to time to the small black figure silhouetted against the amber sky. He had already discerned in the distance the two 'chief men' of the Plumridge Green Chapel, whose custom it was to meet the preachers from Barford half-way, in order that they might talk to them for their good during the latter part of their journey.

They were two of the six old men who sat in the front pew. They walked slowly, with shoulders sloped forward, for their backs were bent with forty years of outdoor work.

'Be you the praicher?' said one.

Paul modestly admitted the fact.

'Well, you be a little 'un, to be sure. Let 's look at 'ee, now.'

They surveyed him slowly, as though he had been a natural curiosity. Paul felt that they were quite capable of walking round him and poking their fingers into his ribs to ascertain if he was in condition. He smiled feebly and blushed vividly.

When they had completed their survey, they addressed one another on the subject.

'Well, he be a little 'un, sure enough, bain't 'ee?'

'Do look as if he have somethin' in him, howsoever.'

'Bigness ain't everythin'.'

'No. 'T is said David were a little 'un.'

'We shall know by the time we 've done wi' him.'

'An' so will he.'

Whereat they smiled grimly, remembering the fate of many other promising apostles who had found martyrdom at Plumridge Green. They established

themselves one on either side of the blushing Paul, as though they had been commissioned to take him into custody. In that order they proceeded along the road in silence for about half a mile.

At last one of them said, rather unjustly, 'Well, young man, you have n't much to say for yourself.'

'What do you expect me to say?'

'Well, talk to us — tell us what you 're goin' to praich about. Be 'ee goin' to praich to us about Peter, now?'

Paul meekly observed that he was not.

'But you must. We 're fond o' Peter up hereabouts.'

'But I can't,' said Paul, with a touch of irritation. There was silence for a few minutes, and then his persecutors began again.

'Do 'ee praich about Peter, now. Tell us what you do think of his character.'

Paul could not understand this unreasonable obstinacy. It was a positive relief when one of the old men turned to

personal questions again by asking how old he was. Paul made confession to his eighteen years, whereupon the other remarked, 'Well, 't is true, you 're but a little 'un.'

Plumridge Green was in sight, and at the fourth cottage on the Green his conductors stopped. There was an hour before service, and Paul was expected to take tea. The other four 'chief men' had already arrived, and were carefully scrutinising him. They began to talk about him with the most elaborate disregard of his presence.

'Potterbee's son?'

'Yes.'

'Well, he ought to be fairish. But 't ain't good fathers as make good sons. I knew a man at St. Colam once who had the cleverest head-piece anywhere round about — Romford his name were — an' his son were a fool.'

'Last one we had up here praiching broke down. He 'd learned his sermon, an' when Johnny Flint pushed the form over it upset him so he forgot ivery

word. So we singed a hymn and went home.'

'Seemed like a good sermon too, if he only could ha' remembered it.'

'No doubt, no doubt. The eggs as is never laid is always the finest.'

''T is a pity to learn sermons. They do never sound the same. 'T is like water from a pump, — the water 's good enough, but you hear the pump-handle a-creaking.'

''T ain't given to iverybody to have his words flow from him nateral.'

Paul felt more and more uncomfortable. He suddenly realised that he must be alone. He wanted once more to consult that excellently written discourse which lay in his breast-pocket. He was certain that he had forgotten the passage in which he treated of life as a cloudy day, and of the natural phenomenon that there was always a blue sky somewhere behind the cloud.

'I should like to be alone for half an hour,' he said apologetically. 'I think I 'll go out for a walk.'

'Certainly, certainly,' said his host. 'Bless you, I 'll go with 'ee. I 'll show 'ee round the village now.'

'But I 'd rather go alone.'

'Oh, but you 'd get lost. You 'd never find your way about. I 'll go with 'ee.'

The six old men looked at one another significantly. They quite understood that Paul wanted to re-read the elaborate production in his pocket.

''T is so,' one said sadly. 'He 've learned it for certain. 'T will be very fine, no doubt, but that sort won't bind up no broken hearts.'

The words caused a curious vibration in the mind of Paul. For the first time, he looked closely at these six old men. It was not only labour that had written all those lines on their faces; the relentless graver of sorrow had been busy there also. Those deep furrows on the cheek had been the channels down which tears had rushed. And in their eyes there was a look that troubled his young heart, that suggested a hunger

not of the body, a yearning for visions not of the earth.

'You 'll praich about Peter, won't 'ee?' was the last word of his host, as he conducted him to the pulpit-stair. 'There 's a many of us here as wants comforting, and we allers feels better when we hear what the dear Lord said to Peter. I wish 'ee well, young man. Don't 'ee be afeard.'

He shook Paul's hand with clumsy cordiality, and the next moment the youth found himself face to face with his audience. The 'chief men' sat in their pews, sad and monumental; three or four dozen people were sprinkled over the place. In a pew near the door sat a woman in black, with five small children; her husband had been buried the week before. The tall, consumptive-looking man by her side was her husband's brother, who had walked over from St. Colam with some vague idea of a funeral service. The only smiling face in the little chapel was that of Solomon Gill, the ploughman, who

acted as precentor. But then Gill was always happy. He glowed under the dullest sermon. The mere name of his Lord made his face kindle.

It was only by degrees that Paul saw all this. A mist was before his eyes, and a great terror clutched his heart. His voice sounded to him like the voice of some one else. It seemed like the thin echo of a voice in a dream, an attenuated voice, the ghost of a voice. He could not believe it possible that any one but himself could hear it. It was with genuine relief that he heard the people join in the singing of the hymn he had given out, — it was an assurance that he could not have been quite inaudible, after all. 'Hark, my soul, it is the Lord,' — yes, they were really singing. Solomon Gill looked up at him with a grateful smile, — it was his favourite hymn. He began to breathe freely again.

The hymn was sung, the Scripture was read, and he had contrived to pray. But now a new terror confronted him.

He was certain that he had forgotten every word of his sermon. He had forgotten where the text was. A terrible suspicion seized him that it was not in the Bible at all. In his agony he boldly dragged his manuscript out of his pocket, but his agitation was so great that he could scarcely read a word of it. They were singing the hymn before the sermon. In another moment or two, preach he must. He turned the Bible over with feverish hands to find the Book of Job. He could not find it. There seemed to be nothing but the Psalms in the Old Testament. It was perfectly ridiculous, — Job *must* be in the Bible. An absurd thought occurred to him, that the Bible used at Plumridge Green Chapel must be some other edition of the Scriptures. Job had been cut out of it, as the Apocrypha had. He would have to give his text out without saying where it was. But then he did not even know the text, — it was something about clouds, and that was all he knew. Dark-

ness seemed to settle over his mind; it fell like a curtain. And then he was suddenly aware of a terrific silence. The hymn had ceased, the people were waiting for him to preach.

'You 'll praich about Peter, won't 'ee? There 's a many of us here wants comforting.'

Who was it had said that? It was a long time ago — perhaps when he was a boy. And with it there sounded like a far-away bell another sentence, — 'Preach Christ; there 's nothing else worth preaching.'

Half mechanically his hand turned to the New Testament. It was quite useless to search for the Book of Job any longer; he was certain that it was not in the Bible — at least, not in the Plumridge Green edition.

His pride hung in tatters. It was all a bitter blunder, — he could not preach. All at once a light broke upon him. He was at the last chapter of St. John's Gospel. He was actually reading out a text, — 'So when they had dined, Jesus

saith to Simon Peter, Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou Me more than these?' The mist lifted, and he saw the people sitting hushed. The 'chief men' were wide awake, and their impassive faces were lifted eagerly to his. A warm rush of love, pity, sympathy, filled his young heart like a tide. He felt borne along by a wind of God,— the sensation was like that he had experienced when he had dreamed he was flying. Yes; he was preaching, but he could not have told how. He was only conscious of a keen passion for souls. He felt as though he was passing into the lives of these people by some sort of miraculous instinct. The woman in black near the door was smiling through her tears, the consumptive-looking man beside her was bent forward, listening. As for Solomon Gill, his face shone like the face of an angel.

It was over. He descended the pulpit, treading delicately, as with winged feet. He walked down the aisle in a kind of rapture, vaguely conscious of

friendly faces shining on him through a heaven-tinted mist. At the door the woman in black laid her hand in his, and said something which sounded like thanks, and he saw the eyes of five small children raised to his in solemn awe. It astonished him as he passed into the open air to find the world quite unchanged. A cuckoo was calling in the woods, the first stars of evening hung in the pale blue sky. He hurried over the Green with the blood surging in his veins. He could not contain himself. His whole experience had been so extraordinary that he found himself talking of it to the very trees as he walked. He wanted to take the whole world into his confidence.

At the cross roads, on the edge of the moor, he met his father that night.

'Father,' he said breathlessly, 'I did n't preach it. I could n't.'

'What did you preach then, my son?'

'I tried to preach Christ,' said Paul, in a low voice.

The old man put his arms round the boy's neck and kissed him.

'I knew you would, my dear boy. For eighteen years your mother and I have prayed for this night, and God is too good to disappoint us. You 'll be an old man some day, Paul, and when you are you 'll be sorry to think that you ever preached anything but Christ. If ever you are tempted to do so, don't forget this night.'

And Paul never did.

# X

## A PIOUS FRAUD

COMING into Barford one spring evening to get a pair of boots mended at Craddock's, Johnny Button saw Lumsden going up the street, and said to Craddock, 'Davy seems in a hurry-like. I wonder now what he 's up to.'

'On the save, you may be sure,' grunted Craddock, for Lumsden's reputation was well known.

'He be a near 'un, bain't 'ee?' said Johnny, adding after a meditative pause, 'though I 've know'd nearer.'

'Nearness *is* nearness,' said Craddock philosophically. 'It be like gutta-percha, you can shape it differen' ways, but, so to speak, 't is always the same thing.'

'That 's true,' said Johnny, 'but still I 've know'd nearer nor Davy. There was a man I know'd once as had to

take the praicher home to dinner two Sundays runnin', an' bein' a near man, he cast about to see 'ow he could do it cheap. Now it so happed that he 'd read in a paper that if you was to put a jint of cooked meat in a oil-cloth, and bury it about a foot in the earth, it 'ud keep no end o' time. This man, I should say, wure a farmer, an' a bachelor, wi' nobody but a old, ancient housekeeper to look after him, an' he put up wi' her bein' old and doddery 'cause she wure cheap. So he says, "Betsy, read that," and he show her the paper. "Shall us try it?" The old 'ooman did n't like to say "no," though she had her doubts. So the farmer digged a hole in his garden, an' the old 'ooman wropped the beef up in an oil-cloth what belonged to her parler table, and put one o' her flanney petticoats round it all, to be quite safe, an' they buried it.

'"I reckon that 'll keep fresh till doomsday," said the farmer, quite proud.

'"Next Sunday's long enough for we," grunted the old 'ooman, for she know'd sh 'd want her flanney petticoat back by then, not havin' more than two anyway.

'And so it might, but for one thing, which both on 'em forgot. They forgot the old retriever dog what was a-watching 'em over the wall all the time. That dog went about lookin' as tho' butter would n't melt in his mouth, till it come dark, an' then the old thief jumped in among the gooseberry bushes, an' went to work. He wure there all night; an' farmer as he went to bed wondered why Rover were so quiet, for gin'rally he wure a dog as barked a lot o' nights. An' what 's more, the old dog raked the earth all down careful agen when he 'd done, as though he understood the joke; so that farmer and Betsy they did n't suspect nothin', tho' I don't doubt the dog wure a-winking at 'em all the time. When the praicher come to dinner that nex' Sunday, he 'ad to be content wi' eggs. The farmer explained as the

reason why he 'ad n't got no beef was that the *foot-an'-mouth* disease was about awful.'

'I guess he shot that dog,' said Craddock, with a grin.

'Not he. He sort o' respeckit the dog for 'aving got the better o' 'im, though it wure a long time before they was on speakin' terms agen. Well, I must be goin'.'

'If you meet Davy Lumsden goin' home, you might tell him that story. Mayhap it 'ud do him good. He owes me for some mendin', an' I can't get nothin' out o' him. His money 'll be like that jint — saved up for somebody else to steal, if he don't mind.'

'I 'll give 'im a hint,' said Johnny solemnly.

As Johnny climbed the hill out of Barford, he saw the tall form of Lumsden ahead of him. Lumsden had a heavy brown paper parcel, whose weight seemed to try him a little. He changed the parcel from hand to hand repeatedly, and at length sat down on the crest of

the hill, wiping his forehead with a red handkerchief. It was here that Johnny caught him up.

'What hav' ee got there, Davy?' said Johnny.

'Somethin' you won't never guess.'

''T ain't sugar, an' it ain't salt,' said Johnny meditatively. 'An' by the shape o' it it ain't ironmongery, an' it ain't grocery. Let me feel of it.'

'Why,' he exclaimed, ''t is as heavy as a 'ouse. Sure, Davy, it ain't books?'

'Books it is,' said Davy.

'Books may be for the childer in the school?'

'No, 't aint. 'T is poetry.'

'Well, I never know'd as poetry wure so heavy. An' I never know'd as you cared for poetry, Davy.'

'No more I don't. 'T is for Benjy. Fact is, 't is Benjy's own poetry.'

A light began to break on Johnny. Benjy was Lumsden's grandson, who had long been engaged in making a painful exit from the world by consumption. It was generally known in

Plumridge Green that Benjy was a poet. Even Mr. Shannon had admitted that there was merit in the lines which he had written for the funeral card of young Penrose, and which began:

'He 's gone because he could n't no more stay,
He 's gone out of earth's night to find heaven's day.'

Poor Benjy had already been a year dying, and as he lay against the window, and looked out on the green world, his one occupation had been to write verses, moulded on the only model he knew, which was the chapel hymn-book.

'You don't mean to say as you 've gone an' prented 'em?' said Johnny.

'I hev',' said Davy, grimly.

'Not in a book, Davy?'

'In a book, sure enough, Johnny. These is them. There 's two hundred an' fifty on 'em. Bambridge, the prenter, would n't prent less, nohow.'

'But what be 'ee goin' to do wi' 'em, Davy?'

'That 's the point,' said Davy, shaking

his grey head, 'an' since you 've spoke, I 'll tell 'ee all about it.

''T is this way. Benjy, since he hev' been took worse, hev' been powerful set on gettin' these po-ums o' his prented. He says, says 'ee, "I want to see 'em in prent, grandfur, all together, like Dr. Watts' hymns. There 's a many poets as hev' died, an' been famous arter they was dead. But it stands to reason as you can't be famous when you 're dead onless you do leave your po-ums all nicely prented. I want 'em all bound up nice, an' on the back o' 'em these words: The Works of Benjamin Lumsden, Poet, of Plumridge Green."'

'That sounds all right,' said Johnny. 'People could n't help a buyin' a book wi' that upon it.'

'So Benjy said. He worked it out careful on a slate. He made out as every man and woman and child in Plumridge Green 'ud want a copy, an' 'ud pay a shillin' for it, free an' glad. Calculating upon that basis, he said, as there 'ud be enough to pay Bambridge

for prenting 'em, an' leave a few pund over to berry 'im with respectable, as a poet ought to be berried. An' he wure likewise particerlar that a copy of the book should be put in the coffin wi' 'im, and that on his gravestone there should be wrote, "Here lieth Benjamin Lumsden of Plumridge Green, Poet."'

'It would n't do, I s'pose,' said Johnny meditatively, 'to put that there tombstone up afore he wure dead, wi' them words on it? I was thinkin' that it 'ud sort o' adverteese the book.'

'Well, he might n't like it, if he know'd,' said Davy anxiously. 'Not but what that is a good idea o' yours, Johnny.'

'You 're welcome to it, Davy,' said Johnny, magnanimously. 'I was thinkin' Benjy 'ud be sure o' havin' his tombstone that way, an' he might n't the other way.'

'I ain't the man to cheat Benjy of his tombstone, and that you know,' said Davy severely.

'I know you ain't, Davy. You 'd

raise it by subscription first, would n't 'ee, Davy? I 've heared o' lots o' poets as they 're subscribed for when they was dead.'

'T ain't the tombstone as troubles me,' went on Davy serenely, 't is this 'ere book. I 'll allow that when Benjy first worked it all out on the slate I was took with the notion — commercially speakin'. I thought as it might be made to pay. But that Bambridge, he hev' discouraged me. He says as he don't see how any one 's goin' to buy the book. Now, Benjy 's keen on the book bein' sold, an' if it ain't sold he 'll be more miserable than if it wure n't prented.'

'I 've always heard as poets was curous folk. I 've had a feel o' bein' took that way myself,' said Johnny. 'But,' he added, with great gravity, 'I resisted it, Davy, I resisted.'

'T ain't no sort o' good talkin' to you, Johnny. You 've got a aggravatin' way o' interruptin', and makin' me forget my thoughts jest when I 'd get the

hang on 'em, so to speak. Now what was I a-sayin' of?'

'Why, about gettin' 'em sold, — Benjy's books, you know.'

'Ah, to be sure,' said Davy, with an air of relief. 'Now, I 've got an idea, Johnny, if so be as you 'll help me.'

'Well, let 's hear it,' said Johnny, siting down upon the parcel of books, which lay conveniently on the road.

''T is this, Johnny. I don't see nohow what 's to be done wi' these blamed books o' Benjy's, but I want to please the poor lad. I doubt I 've been a fool in getting 'em prented, but Benjy, he looked so whisht, an' begged so hard, that I could n't say him no. Six pund ten I hev' paid Bambridge for prentin' o' 'em, an' that 's an awful lot o' money to lose, Johnny.'

''T is so,' said Johnny. 'Eh, but it must ha' hurt 'ee to part wi' so much.'

'It did,' said Davy. 'You never spoke a truer word. But 't were for the lad's sake, an' when anybody 's dyin', you somehow do feel different about things.'

'Well, now, what I were a thinking was this. Suppose you, an' Baxter, an' Gill, an' the rest o' you, do come in one arter another, an' say, "We 've heard as Benjy's po-ums is prented, and we wants a copy." You can put down a shillin' on the table, each on you, where Benjy can see it, an' I 'll give it back to 'ee at the door. 'T is a game as might be kep' up till all they books was gone, you sayin' that other folk has sent you, an' the whole place wanted 'em. It 'ud kind o' cheer up Benjy, and maybe he 'd die more easier.'

'But maybe you would n't give me that shillin' back agen,' said Johnny slyly. 'It 'ud hurt 'ee dreadful to do it, Davy.'

'Honour bright,' said Davy earnestly. 'Benjy's all I 've got left, an' I want 'im to die happy.'

'Well,' said Johnny, ''t is a sort o' pious fraud, but p'raps God 'ull forgive it we, for Benjy's sake. I don't think as Gill will take the shillin' back, an' I know I won't. Otherwise, 't is a good

idea, Davy, an' if 't will help Benjy to die more easier I don't mind a tryin' it.'

It was so arranged between the two old men, and that very night the pious fraud was put into operation. Johnny Button was the first to come, and gave a great air of reality to the proceedings by the eager manner in which he opened Benjy's book, and led Benjy to describe the circumstances under which this or that poem was composed.

'It comes to me sudden-like,' said the poor boy, as he sat up in his bed under the window, his pale face touched with a little flame of modest pride. 'I hear the lark a-singing, an' I see the hedges gettin' white, an' I think how as I shan't see 'em much longer, an' then I wants to write somethin'.'

'Ah,' said Johnny sympathetically, 'I 've been took that way myself, but I resisted.'

'So did I, at first,' said Benjy simply. 'I thought as it were n't possible for me to put down what I felt. But after a while the knack o' it came to me, an' it

made me happy to do it. There 's them lines about Will Penrose, "He 's gone out of earth's night to find heaven's day," — I can mind I cried when I wrote 'em — sort o' happy cryin', you know, thinkin' that I was a-goin' too.'

Lumsden's living-room was full of visitors that night. Benjy's book was handed from one to another in silent wonder. Baxter made no pretence of hiding his tears, for he had found at page sixteen some memorial lines on a 'Child Who Died Young,' and Benjy confessed that it was little Elsie Baxter he was thinking of when he wrote them.

'I 'll ha' six o' they books, Davy,' said Baxter, 'an' there 's my six shillens.'

Gill, in his simple fashion, prayed with Benjy, and so, after all, there was a thread of true piety woven into the fraud. The piece Gill liked best was some lines upon the Cross, which he said he knew a tune as 'ud fit, and might be taught the childer in the school. In fact he produced his tuning-fork, and struck the tune there and then, saying,

'Listen to this, my sonny. It do fit it beautiful; an' maybe 't will help 'ee to die, knowin' when you 're a-singin' up there wi' God, we shall be a-singin' down here what you did write.'

In fact, it must be confessed that the brilliant fraud devised by the genius of Davy Lumsden never came off. Johnny himself felt, after that night with Benjy, that he could not very well bring himself to cheat a dying boy, even with the most benevolent intentions. Nor was there any need. The news of Benjy's book spread through the village, and there were very few persons who did not want to possess a copy.

Every evening, when work was over, people came to Davy's door asking for Benjy's book. The news of it spread as far as Barford, and the crowning joy came when the 'Barford Recorder' had a paragraph about it, and drew a pathetic picture of the dying poet, with certain fine literary allusions to some one called John Keats, whose name was quite unknown at Plumridge Green.

The night on which the 'Barford Recorder' reached Lumsden's cottage, Benjy was taken much worse. But toward midnight he rallied a good deal, and Davy was content to think him about as usual.

'Gran'fur,' he said, 'is they all sold yet?'

'Most all,' said Davy. 'Maybe there 's a dozen left, sonny.'

'Draw the table out, and let me see the money.'

The table was pushed against his bed, and the boy counted over the coins with delighted fingers.

''T is wonderful, ain't it, gran'fur, to think of all this money bein' earned out o' my little book. But I said as it 'ud be so, did n't I?'

'You did, my sonny.'

'An' you won't lose nothin' by it, will you, gran'fur? An' I shall get my tombstone, an' on it you will put in black letters, "Here lieth Benjamin Lumsden, of Plumridge Green, Poet." Well, I don't mind dyin' now.'

The old man's mouth quivered.

'Benjy,' he said, 'you shall hev' the finest tombstone as was ever seen put over 'ee.'

'But I don't want it to cost you nothin', gran'fur. I've cost 'ee a lot a'ready, bein' ill so long.'

The old man's heart suddenly melted. He realised that he was about to be left alone.

'Benjy, boy,' he said in a broken voice, 'I'd give all I've got rather than lose 'ee. I would, indeed.'

The boy lay quite quiet for five minutes after that speech, with a glow of joy on his face.

'Gran'fur,' he said at last, ''t is better for me to go, for I don't think as I could write another book. An' I've been a great expense . . . so long . . . an' you not well-off, as you've often said. You'd use to blame me because I did n't earn nothin', an' that's why I'm so glad I've earned somethin' before I died. Give me the book again, and the paper,

and draw up the blind, so as I can see the moon a-shinin'.'

The old man obeyed without a word. He was heart-sick with reproach. He turned as he left the room to take a last look at Benjy.

The boy lay back on his pillows under the window, and the moon put a coverlet of silver over him; in his hand he held the 'Works of Benjamin Lumsden, Poet,' and on the pillow beside him lay the paper which had praised him.

He had not moved in the morning. The only difference was that the sun had cast a brocade of gold across the lad, and the whiteness of the moonlight had passed into his face.

# XI

## THE EXTRAVAGANCE OF SOLOMON GILL

'I WOULD N'T like to say as it were wicked,' remarked old David Lumsden as he met Johnny Button crossing Plumridge Green, 'but I 'm bound to say as it ain't fittin'.'

Lumsden and Button were the two old men who met young Potterbee on the night he preached his first sermon, and they were now engaged in discussing the conduct of Solomon Gill.

'To my knowledge, Gill have been hard put to it this winter a'ready,' he continued, 'an' he ain't so young as he were. He ought to be a-savin' somethin', he did. But you can't move Gill when he have made up his mind. He 've giv' that missionary supper this thirty year, an' 't is my belief that if he

know'd he 'd go scat to-morrow morn, he 'd spend his last penny on it.'

Johnny Button indulged in a snigger, which was instantly suppressed. He was not by nature a humorous man, but he had occasional moments when, as he said, 'things came to him, funny-like.'

The 'thing' that had come to him at this moment was a very old story about Lumsden. It was said that Lumsden had once been a 'chief man' in a neighbouring chapel, where upon a certain occasion it had been necessary to find a home for a 'supply.' No one had felt equal to the honour, and there was a prolonged discussion on the subject, which ended in Lumsden offering to submit to the inconvenience if the people would pay the costs which he incurred. This was agreed upon, and Lumsden received much praise for his public-spirited conduct.

'You 'd like him to be treated respectable?' he was reported to have said.

The people agreed that they would.

'And waited on proper? If we be poor, 't is no cause why we should be looked down upon.'

This also was felt to be an admirable sentiment, which did Lumsden honour.

'They "supplies" what come from the collidge is used to luxury,' he continued. ''T is said they do moastly sleep on feather beds, and stay with gentle-foak when they do go to praich. They do have four meals a day reg'lar, and the collidge is a kind o' palace. I know a man as seed it, and he told me.'

These facts produced consternation. Such grandeur in connection with 'supplies' had not been dreamed of.

'We wonder as you dare attempt it. 'T will be dreadful tryin' for 'ee to keep it up proper from Saturday night to Monday morning. And very like he 'll stay to dinner Monday too. They moastly does.'

'You leave that to me,' Lumsden replied. 'I 'll not disgrace ye.'

Lumsden certainly did not disgrace them. He had long felt that his cot-

tage needed papering, and manifestly this was the predestined hour for the operation. A fresh coat of whitewash is known to be a good thing for health, and when you are whitewashing one room you may as well do the whole house. It is likewise an accepted axiom that cleanliness is next to godliness, and when a charwoman costs only one-and-sixpence per day, no one would grudge that the cottage should be thoroughly scrubbed. As for slight repairs to a window that would not open, and a bedroom door that would not shut, these were matters which Lumsden could do himself, and charge for at a purely nominal rate. The end of the affair was that Lumsden got his cottage completely repaired at the cost of the Bethesda folk, besides laying in so much food for the 'supply' that it was commonly estimated that he did n't need to buy anything more for a week. Such was the philanthropy of David Lumsden. Johnny Button happened to think of it when he heard Lumsden de-

nounce the extravagance of Solomon Gill, and that was why he sniggered.

'There 's no call to laugh,' said Lumsden severely.

'I was a-thinkin' o' somethin',' said Button meekly. 'Foaks can't help their thoughts.'

'An' I 'm a-thinkin' of somethin' too,' said Lumsden. 'I 'm a-thinkin' what 'll become o' Gill if that rheumatis of his gets worse. I 'll warrant he ain't saved a penny agenst a rainy day.'

'Not like you, eh?'

'I should think not indeed. Foaks like Gill thinks as Providence has n't nothin' else to do but pay their debts for 'em. I 'd rather pay my own, in case Providence should n't happen to remember.'

The two old men strolled across to the chapel, whose doors stood wide open, for Roach, the carpenter, was busy putting up the platform for the missionary meeting. Baxter, the wheelwright, was already there, under pretence of helping him. They also were

engaged in discussing Solomon Gill, but from another point of view.

'He 's about done, is Gill,' said Roach, as he sat down to rest on a trestle. 'He 've struck the tune wrong these two Sundays runnin'. My opeenion is as the time 's come when we should have an orgin.'

'I don't hold with orgins, myself,' said Baxter.

'That 's 'cause you don't know no better,' said Roach. 'I 'll allow they ain't much good when you do twidle-twidle 'em, like that chap do down to Barford Church. You do want to bang 'em and whack 'em, and then they 're grand. I 've heer'd a horgin as shook the winders.'

'Where might that be?' said Johnny Button, whose knowledge of music was supposed to be profound, owing to the circumstance that he had once been known to play the Old Hundred on his flute without a single error of any importance.

'Down Belchester way,' said Roach.

'It were in a new chapel they 'd put up, an' it were on the opening day. It were a chap from Belchester as come over an' played. My! You should ha' seed him! When he could n't get no more sound out o' the top part o' her, he jest stood up, an' jumped like mad on them things they calls the pedals, like a jumpin' on her toes, so to speak, an' you should ha' heard 'er roar!'

'I don't like music like that,' said Button critically, as became a master of the flute. 'I like it soft, like birds a-singin'.'

'Well, an' he played her soft too, if it comes to that. When he 'd made her roar, he made her whisper, so to speak. I seed foak a-cryin'. I did.'

'I ain't goin' to say a word agenst Gill,' said Baxter. 'I don't say as I 'd stand out on princerple agenst one o' them little orgins — harmonys they calls 'em. They don't shake no winders, an' you can sing to 'em. But Gill's good enough for me. There ain't a better man hereabout, an' when

the sermon 's a bit poorish, I take a look at Gill all a-beamin' in his pew, an' someway I feel better for it — feel as if 't were a middlin' good sermon after all.'

'Be you goin' to Gill's supper to-night?' interposed Lumsden, who was anxious to lead the conversation back to a theme on which he was better qualified to offer an opinion.

'I be,' said Baxter, 'an' proud to go. Would n't miss it nohow.'

'Well, what I 've been a-sayin' to Johnny Button is jest this,' said Lumsden oracularly, 'that I don't think we ought to encourage Gill in any sich extravagance. I don't believe as he can afford it, an' he ought n't to do it.'

'Don't you worry about Gill,' said Baxter, with a sardonic smile. 'There 's some foak as finds more pleasure in givin' than what they does in savin'. 'T is n't every one as looks as long at a ha'peny as you do, Davy.'

'An' there 's some foak as lives long enough to wish they 'd got a ha'penny

to look at,' retorted Lumsden. ' 'T is a poor lookout when you 're nigh on seventy, an' got the rheumatis bad, to think o' all the money you 've give to them missionaries what never had no rheumatis.'

' I don't see mysel' what the rheumatis has to do wi' it,' said Baxter. ' If they missionaries don't have the rheumatis, they has things which is a hundred times as bad. There 's Widow Penrose's boy down to St. Colam, he went for a missionary, and everybody knows as he come home as yellow as a guinea, and she 's a-wearin' black for him still.'

' Very like,' said Lumsden, ' very like. That ain't my point. My point is that there ain't no call for Gill to starve hisself to feed foak what 's better fed nor what he is. I don't believe in payin' men to put their heads in the lion's mouth, neither. Not that there 's much o' that. They missionaries knows how to take care o' theirselves, you may depend.'

Lumsden and Johnny Button strolled away, taking the path across the Green which led them out on the high road, past Gill's cottage.

'You see,' said Lumsden, pointing ironically to the smoke that was rising from Gill's chimney, 'he's at it a'ready. Boilin' and bakin' like mad, I 'll be bound. You take warnin', Johnny, and don't you go and spend your substance in riotous livin' like to 'im, for I 'll warn 'ee, Johnny, though I be your freend, that I won't help 'ee, when ye comes to the husks which the swine do eat.'

'I know ye would n't, Davy,' said Johnny meekly. 'No, not a stiver.'

'I might want to, ye know,' said Davy, by way of vindicating his better nature. There were times when he half suspected that Johnny made fun of him.

'Ah, but ye would n't,' said Johnny. 'Not if ye wanted never so. I 've know'd ye want to put sixpence in the plate many a time, Davy, but ye never did, did ye? An' I 've said many a

time, when I 've seed 'ee put a ha'penny in, "Well, Davy did want to put a sixpence in that time, but maybe he did n't want hard enough." It takes a powerful lot o' wanting to git as high as sixpence, don't it, Davy?'

'It do,' said Davy solemnly. 'I 'll say this for mysel', I allers takes a sixpence with me when I goes to meetin'.'

'An' can't never get it put in. Eh, but that must be a trial to 'ee, Davy.'

''T is so, Johnny, in a way o' speaking. Some on us is tried one way, and some on us another. It all comes of bein' a man with a far-seein' mind, Johnny.'

'I always know'd you 'd that sort o' mind, Davy. You 've been famous for that sort o' mind iver since you comed among we. Kind o' mind that acts on princerple, ain't it, Davy?'

'That 's it, Johnny. 'T is princerple what keeps me from givin'. I says to mysel', says I, "'T ain't 'cordin' to princerple to give your 'ard-earned money to them what wears better coats

nor what you do." Now Gill ain't got no princerple. He ain't gifted with a far seein' mind. He 'd give his shirt away if he felt like it, and niver ask whether he'd got another at home in the drawer.'

'Ah, 't is so,' said Johnny, with an air of profound commiseration. 'An' as for them husks you was a-speakin' of, I dare say the pigs felt, when that there prodigal come among 'em, that on princerple they did n't ought to let 'im have any. 'T is a queer thing is princerple!'

Davy glanced at Johnny suspiciously, but Johnny had the art of looking quite impenetrable when he pleased. He wore just now the air of a man who was merely uttering a few pious meditations in a lonely place, where no one could overhear him.

Solomon Gill's supper that night was one of unusual splendour. His cottage was a three-roomed one, with a lean-to scullery at the back, for Gill was a bachelor, and needed little accommoda-

tion. As a rule he did his own cleaning and cooking, but on this great annual occasion he got old Mrs. Maddison to come in and help him, and Mrs. Maddison's bread was a thing of renown at Plumridge Green.

The brick floor of the living-room had been scrubbed till it had a ruddy polish; the common black handled knives glittered like silver, and the coarse table-cloth was of princely whiteness. On the table was a huge loaf of home-baked bread, a loin of pork roasted to a turn, a jug of very small beer for those who had not learned the superiority of tea, and an apple-pie, flanked by a jug of fresh cream. But the place of honour was given to a missionary-box of the largest attainable dimensions, which stood upon a basin turned the wrong side up, between the pork and the apple-pie.

'Ye 'll make yourselves kindly welcome,' said Gill, as he shook hands with the deputation from Barford, which consisted of old Mr. Shannon,

and a sallow missionary who had been astonishing an audience at the chapel for the last hour, with extraordinary stories of the work of Christ in Madagascar. Baxter, and Button, and three or four of the chapel worthies stood modestly near the door till the deputation was seated. They then took their places on a plank, insecurely supported by two empty soap-boxes, and held an animated conversation with each other by means of nods and nudges.

And I, who witnessed it, can aver that it was a sight to see old Solomon Gill rise solemnly to ask a blessing. He had a noble head, with a high, bald forehead, such as I have often seen since in the portraits of great ecclesiastics, which the famous masters of a great age of painting have bequeathed to us. He wore his ploughman's smock, which one might easily have mistaken for the cassock of a saint, so fair and white was it. And in that wrinkled face of his there was a true light of sainthood, a softened glow of great

peace, which is found only on the faces of those who are much alone with God.

'We thank Thee, who hast given us richly all things to enjoy,' said the old man solemnly.

I have sometimes thought that that thanksgiving might have better suited the tables of the rich; but I have never heard it there. I only heard it once; and it was upon the lips of an old ploughman, who earned from nine to eleven shillings a week.

'Well,' whispered Baxter to Johnny Button, 'I must say as Gill have done it 'andsomer than iver this year. I dunno' how he do manage it.'

'Does it on princerple,' said Johnny drily, with a recollection of the morning's conversation.

'I don't 'spose now that there missionary do get a meal like to this ivery day.'

'Not he. Do look as if he 'd like to, however.'

'Wonnerful, to think what he have gone through.'

'Lost his little childer there, they do say. Died one arter another wi' the fever. He 've got a look himself like Widow Penrose's son what died.'

'They do say as he 's goin' back, howsomever, an' his wife as mad to go as he be. Takes a brave heart to do that, I reckon, 'specially when they thinks o' them little graves.'

'I doubt I could n't do it,' said Baxter, with a sigh. He was thinking of his own four little children, and of the one who died of the measles in the spring.

'Gill could,' said Johnny.

'Ah, Gill 's someway different to we. I 've often wondered what it was. Maybe Christ is more real-like to him than what He be to some on us.'

The meal was over, and the crowning event of the year for Solomon Gill was about to happen. This was the opening of the missionary-box.

It was solemnly deposed from its place upon the basin, and Gill's hand

trembled as he took one of the knives to open it.

'I ain't as quick as I were,' he said. 'My poor hands 'as got all crippled up with the rheumatis this winter. But, bless 'ee, I 'll manage it all right, if ye 'll only give me time.'

No one thought of offering him help. The missionary, who had it on his tongue to do so, saw well enough by our faces how we regarded the affair. Gill was tasting the most ecstatic hour of his simple life. He lingered over the box fondly, as if anxious to prolong the exquisite suspense. He cut the paper at the back which concealed the flap of the box, gingerly, as though it hurt him to do so. I saw the missionary pass his hand over his eyes, and I respected him for those tears. Perhaps he was thinking that those little graves in a far land were worth the price after all, so long as men like Solomon Gill existed.

At last the wooden flap opened with a creak. The money began to pour out

into the plate upon the table. There was scarcely any copper. There were many sixpences and some shillings. There was one gold piece which I thought I recognised. I knew that Gill had had a half-sovereign that year as a Christmas-box from his employer.

It was slowly counted up, while we stood round the table in expressive silence. The half-sovereign lay by itself in golden dignity; the little piles of silver stood round at a respectful distance; the coppers seemed ashamed of themselves, and cowered in the shadow of the cream-jug.

'Three pound fifteen and sevenpence,' said Mr. Shannon slowly. 'Well, Gill, that 's the best you 've done yet. I wish my people in Barford would do half as well.'

''T ain't too much for such a cause,' said Gill, his face all aglow. 'I wish 't were more, sir. When I think o' all the good Lord ha' done for me, I feel as I can't niver do enough for Him.'

There was a pause, and then Gill said

timidly, 'You would n't think it proud o' me, sir, if we was to sing the Doxology, would 'ee? I feel as if I 'd like to sing summat, an' there ain't nothin' I 'd like to sing so well.'

So Gill produced his well-worn tuning-fork, and struck the key-note, and we all sung with a will.

It was a pity Davy Lumsden was not there; but, as he said next day, he 'stayed away on princerple.'

# XII

## A CASE FOR CONFLICT

NO one who saw Solomon Gill listening with meek ecstasy to an indifferent discourse in the Plumridge Green Chapel would ever have imagined that he had in him the stuff of which warriors are made; nevertheless, there had been a time when Gill had fought a good fight which had made him quite a popular hero. It had happened in the years before his shoulders stooped, when his Sunday coat had lost none of its gilt buttons.

In those days Gill was straight and elastic as a poplar, and was noted as the handiest man upon a farm who could be found in four parishes. Now it fell out at this time that the farm where he had worked from a boy changed hands, and the new tenant was a rough, bullying fellow called Wildgent, who came from

beyond Southminster. Gill would have taken no notice of his bullying ways, but it happened that this Wildgent soon gave out that he detested all 'meetingers,' and was determined that no 'meetinger' should work on his farm. Gill heard of this, and his grey eyes flashed. But he took no notice of it; if anything, he did his work better than ever, so that Wildgent, who was no fool, put off giving him notice to go because he knew well enough that it would be mighty difficult to fill his place.

'You 've heard what that Wildgent's a-doing of?' said Johnny Button to Gill, as he met him coming home from work one spring night.

'Ay,' said Gill, 'there 's not much you can tell me about Wildgent that I don't know. He 's rootin' we meetin'ers out, one by one, an' I don't doubt but my turn 'll come presently.'

'An' what be you a-goin' to do about it?'

'I 'll tell 'ee when the time do come, Johnny,' said Gill, with a wise smile.

'I 'm not one o' those who can't eat to-day's bread because I 'm not sure how to-morrow's 'll turn out in the bakin'.'

And with these enigmatic words Gill went off down the road to his cottage, softly whistling a hymn-tune as he walked.

This was on Saturday night, and after supper. Gill's mother, who was alive then, began to talk to him on the same subject. She was one of those querulous, faint-hearted women who live with the vision of the workhouse before their eyes, and she had heard rumours of the conduct of Wildgent, and was full of trouble over what she had heard.

'I should think as you would n't let him turn you away on account of your goin' to meetin', Sol, would 'ee, now?' she remarked, in her thin, complaining voice.

'Why, mother,' he answered, 'we 're in the Lord's hands, and who can harm the Lord's elect? There 's no cause

for you to worry,' and he stooped his tall figure and kissed her gently on the forehead.

'Cause enough if we be goin' to starve,' she retorted.

'There, there, don't 'ee fear, mother. If the Lord meant we to starve He could do it directly minute, by just touchin' these poor bodies of ours, an' takin' our strength away. You and me has been kept strong and been well fed these many years, an' the Lord ain't to be put out o' His ways by no Wildgents.'

'That don't satisfy me,' she replied petulantly. 'If we let the bread be took out of our own mouths, we can't expect the Lord to put it in agen. An', for my part, I can't see that it matters much to the Lord whether we do go to church or meetin'. He as is above won't think any better of we whichever we do, nor any worse neither.'

'But He expects us to do what we know is right,' said Gill, 'an' I'm agoin' to do it. It 'ud take a bigger

man than Wildgent to make me do any other.'

Gill consoled himself with several warlike Psalms that night, and as he read them aloud with much quiet animation, even his mother felt a little pulse of courage throb in her members.

'I allers did like they bloodthirsty stories about they old wars,' she remarked with a serene Pagan indifference to any more spiritual suggestion; 'they do kind o' warm 'ee up, anyway.'

Now it is extremely unlikely that Wildgent would have dismissed Gill at all, knowing his worth too well, but on this very Sunday he happened to be in an evil mood, and what must he do but ride down into Plumridge Green, on the lookout for a cause to quarrel with Gill. He had been drinking a good deal during the day, and warming up his fury against meetingers, whom he regarded as a parcel of sanctimonious knaves who neglected their duty. As he galloped along the roads it was easy to persuade himself that he was doing

all the work of his farm himself while Gill was idling his time away in the Meeting-house. By the time he reached Plumridge Green he was in as hot a rage as could be wished, and the sound of singing in the chapel did not improve his temper. He reined up his horse at the door, and began to think of what a fine surprise it would be for Gill if he dismissed him then and there.

The dusk had fallen, and the service was near its close. The lamps had been lit in the chapel, and Wildgent could see through the windows Gill standing at his desk, beating time as the hymn was sung.

> 'If some poor wandering child of Thine
> To-day had spurned the voice divine,'

were the pathetic words which floated out upon the evening stillness. But they only increased Wildgent's unreasonable anger. 'I 'll have no psalm-singing fools on my farm,' he said, with an oath. He struck his horse a pur-

poseless blow, and his dark face became flushed and evil. Just then the doors opened, and the little congregation began to troop out in twos and threes. They looked at the dark man seated on his foam-flecked horse with wondering and alarmed eyes.

'Been to your Sunday cant-shop?' he said with a bitter smile. But no one answered him a word.

'Oh, you won't open your mouths,' he roared at them. 'You could open them wide enough a minute ago. Ah, Sammy Baker, you're one of 'em, are you? Here, take your week's wage, and don't show yourself on my farm again, unless you want horsewhipping. Where's Gill? Oh, there he is, the long-jawed hypocrite. Won't work on Sundays, eh? Then, by heavens, I'll take care you shan't work on week-days either.' He flung some silver on the ground with a passionate gesture. 'There's your money, you snivelling psalm-singer. Get those who like your cursed noise pay you for making it.

Not another penny of my money shall you handle, my man!'

No one thought of touching the money, least of all Gill. It lay glittering on the little paved path that led to the chapel-door.

'I 've served you true, sir,' said Gill, in a steady voice, 'an' I 'd ha' gone on servin' you true if you 'd ha' let me. But I 'm not the man to sell my Lord for thirty pieces of silver. Don't none o' you touch that money,' he said, with a glance at the frightened crowd. 'Let it lie there. Thy money perish with thee,' he concluded, with a gesture that might almost be called sublime, 'and the Lord be judge between me and thee, sir.'

'Don't try your humbug on me,' cried Wildgent threateningly. In his rage he lifted his whip, as if he would strike Gill.

'You can't forbid my prayin' for you,' said Gill. 'An' I 'll pray the dear Lord that He may bring you to a better mind.'

At that Wildgent seemed a little ashamed of his passion. He scowled down at Gill, and swore a deep oath. Then he turned his horse and rode sulkily away. The next morning the money still lay scattered on the ground. No one had picked it up.

That week there was very little else talked about all over the countryside but this strange folly of Wildgent. Every man and boy left upon the farm watched Wildgent out of the tail of his eye. After work at night they reported progress to interested groups upon the Green.

'Seems to me,' said Slocombe, the chief shepherd, a tall and excessively lean man, much given to gloomy thoughts and superstitious fancies, 'the maister be demented. Like as though the devil had entered into him for sure, same as in the Gospels.'

'Such things don't happen now-a-days,' said Jan Peascod, a withered old labourer, who had never been to either church or chapel in his life, and was

supposed to entertain a fine free-thinking scorn for every species of religion.

'Much you do know about it,' retorted Slocombe severely. 'Folk as shut their eyes don't see much, an' least o' all blasphemiously-minded folk like you. But I know what I know, an' I hev' seen sights.'

'It were you as saw Poll Trevanion's ghost the night she were drownded, were n't it, shepherd?' said Sanders, a middle-aged bilious carter, who was a notorious coward after dark.

'It were,' said the shepherd solemnly. 'Saw the pore thing a-comin' over the Three Acre Bottom, a-wringing of her 'ands, an' the water a-drippin' from her hair as she coomed. An' there was a wind coomed with her, cold as death, though it were, as you do all know, the mid-week of August.'

'You hev' n't seed Wildgent's ghost by no manner o' means, hev' 'ee, shepherd,' said Jan with a feeble effort at jocosity.

'No, but I hev' seen what 's worse,'

said the shepherd. 'I hev' seen an awful thing a-lookin' out of his eyes. Can ye tell me, nee'bours, what 't is do make a grit flock o' sheep all on a sudden take to runnin' wi'out no cause, and go on runnin' an' bleatin' in a sort o' sweatin' terror, till they do jump into a pit? 'T is the devil for sure as do enter into they. An' 't is so wi' the maister. His eye hev' the same look I hev' seen in they sheep's; take my word for it, nee'bours, 't is the devil hev' entered into he.'

It seemed a plausible enough explanation, and before another week was out it had attained the dimensions of a legend. It was quite certain that the black dog sat on Wildgent's back. The man rode about his farm all day in a dark smouldering rage, ready to break out into a fury of words at the least trifle. His men trembled before him, and dreaded the sound of his voice. Moreover, things were going wrong upon the farm. The man he had engaged in Gill's place was hopelessly

incompetent. The worse things went the more furious grew Wildgent's rage, and the harder he drank. He found himself looked at askance and generally avoided in Barford market. The story of his misdeeds lost nothing as it flew from mouth to mouth, and men regarded him with sullen curiosity or plain aversion.

In the meantime Gill sat at home in his little cottage, and possessed his soul in peace. He might easily enough have found another situation, and there were plenty of farmers eager to engage him.

'Why don't 'ee get another place?' said Johnny Button to him more than once.

'I dwell among my own people,' he replied, with a touch of pride. 'Boy an' man I 've worked nigh on' thirty years up to Elm-tree Farm, an' I can't justly make up my mind to leave it. I know every tree upon the farm, an' a'most every twig upon the trees. I 've sowed the corn there this twenty year, an' I 've reaped the harvest. 'T is as-

tonishing how these things do lay hold on you. The very earth gets to know you, in a way o' speaking. I doubt I should n't do so well nowheres else.'

'That 's all very well,' said Johnny, 'but you 've got to live.'

'Don't you worry about me, Johnny,' he replied. 'The Lord cares for His own, an' 't is fair astonishin' on how little you can live when your heart be at rest. Besides, there be somethin' that tells me that I 'm agoin' back to my old place before long.'

'Been a-dreamin' like Pharaoh's butler in the prison?' said Johnny.

'Maybe,' answered Gill, 'but 't is a better dream than he ever had. There 's One as walks in it like unto the Son of Man.'

Johnny said no more, for he felt silenced by the quiet faith of the man. But he went about and repeated Gill's words, and now it was a legend about Gill that began to grow. Folks dimly realised that there was something higher than the mere heroic in Gill's attitude.

They had the sense of witnessing a conflict in which unseen forces were engaged. On Sundays the little chapel was crowded, and all eyes were fixed on Gill when he took out his tuning-fork to raise the tune. A spiritual effluence clothed him in such moments, and the dullest recognised it as something sweet and awful. Men shook his hand after the service, and had a sense of pride in doing so. But when they tried to show their sympathy with him by speaking hard words of Wildgent, Gill always stopped them.

'He knows no better, poor man,' he would say. 'I doubt he 's had some trouble that has soured his mind. 'T is n't every soil grows corn, and the weeds must be burned out of any soil before 't is worth the sowin'. We 've no call to abuse a soil, nee'bours, for what it can't help.'

June had now come, and the full rush of summer was upon the earth. In low-lying meadows the sound of the scythe was heard, and the haymaking

had commenced. In sunny orchards the cherries were already ripe, and men and boys, gathering the fruit, called to one another from the shaking trees, as from skiey nests. There was a sound of a going in the tree-tops, a mirth of voices that ran across the valleys like a wave.

Gill still sat silent in his cottage, but he was no longer quite at ease. He had long since done all that could be done to his own small patch of ground, and his hands hung idle. The few pounds — they were very few — which he had saved were spent. His mother's voice, like the persistent buzz of some unhappy insect, vibrated ceaselessly upon his ears.

'I should think you was ashamed o' yourself, a girt strong man like you, a-doin' nothin',' she was always saying. 'I see what it means — you an' me 's bound for the 'House, an' much good your chapel 'll do 'ee then, when you be a pauper. An' we Gills hev' always been respectable, too.' And the poor

woman flung her apron over her face and wept.

Gill rose softly, and went out into his garden much perplexed. He had waited now two months for some sign from Wildgent, and none had come. He still cherished stubbornly the hope of going back to Elm-tree Farm, but his hope diminished with every week of waiting. For the last few days he had lived upon bread and such green herbs as he could gather in his garden. He came into the house again now with some green stuff under his arm, wondering whether after all it were not his duty, for his mother's sake, to get another place in some adjoining parish.

When he reached the door he paused terror-struck. His mother stood on the other side the room against the window with the missionary-box in her hands. She was endeavouring to prise the back open with a knife. He watched her a moment in an agony of thought. Then he stepped forward with a pale face. He was not angry, he was only inex-

pressibly shocked. He laid his hand upon her shoulder, and she dropped the box with a cry.

'Mother, mother,' he said, in faltering tones, 'you were not going . . . not going to steal?'

'I don't see no stealin' in it,' she retorted angrily. ''T is your own money anyway. You put it in there, an' if you don't want to starve, you've just got to take it out agen.'

''T is God's money,' he whispered, with awe-struck reverence.

'Then let God pay for all the trouble He's caused you. 'T is not askin' much o' Him that is above to do that.'

'I'd die before I touched it,' he said with such intensity that his mother was awed. She had no more strength left in her, and could only weep.

Gill picked up the box, and restored it to its place upon the mantel. Then he crossed the room, put his arm round his mother's neck, and said softly, 'There, mother, you didn't mean it. You was only a-lookin' at it, maybe.

There 's strange things come to our minds, like as 't were big black clouds that do come out of no one knows where. But they do pass away agen, an' melt.'

He was still talking to his mother, when there was a smart rap upon the door. It was Wildgent. Gill opened the door, and Wildgent stepped in without a word.

He had greatly altered since that day when he had scowled down on Gill at the chapel door. The boldness had gone out of his face, the insolent fire from his eyes. His cheeks hung pale and flabby, and if ever a man's looks expressed fear Wildgent's did.

He glanced round the room almost timidly. He saw half a loaf of bread and the herbs upon the table, and guessed that this was Gill's dinner. He twice made an effort to speak, and failed. Something choked him.

'I 'm real glad to see you, sir, if so be you come friendly,' said Gill. 'I told 'ee I would pray for 'ee, and I hev'.'

'You 've prayed for me . . . for *me?*' he said gloomily. 'Well, if you 've prayed that harm might come to me, your prayer has been answered. I believe I 'm the unhappiest devil in the world. Upon my word,' he added, with a touch of his old contempt, 'I should believe I 'd been bewitched, if I believed in such things at all.'

'Surely not,' said Gill. 'I 've prayed no harm for 'ee, sir. 'T was only good I prayed for 'ee.'

'Well,' said Wildgent, 'we 'll leave that. Somehow I believe you, though I never thought it possible I could. The long and short of it is, will you come back? I know you 're a good servant, an' I believe I could be a good master, if I tried.'

'That I will, sir, and gladly,' said Gill. 'But I 'm a "meetinger," you know,' he added with a whimsical smile.

'I wish all my men were "meetingers," if they did their work as well as you used to,' said Wildgent. ''Pon

my word, I think I 'll turn meetinger too. God knows, a poor devil like me wants something to keep him straight.'

'I told you,' said Gill that night to Johnny Button, 'the weeds has to be burned off the soil before it 'll grow corn. 'T is my belief that man's rage was just the fire that burned up the weeds in him. You 'll see, he 'll grow the good corn yet.'

# XIII

## THE LAST HOME

'IT WILL be a black shame if we do let it happen,' said Baxter, as he met Johnny Button on the Green one grey March morning.

'How can we help it?' said Johnny despondently. 'I 'll allow, for my part, as I 'd liefer die in a ditch, but Gill ain't like we. He jest treats it sort o' smilin', an' says 't is the Lord's will.'

'Don't you make no mistake,' Baxter retorted hotly. 'Gill feels it, though he 's man enough to hide his feelin's. I was a-passin' late the other night, an' seein' a light in the winder I looked in, an' seed what I don't want to see no more. Gill was a-takin' a few bits o' things out o' his cupboard, and puttin' 'em together in the middle o' the table. There was some chaney

I 've heer'd him say was his mother's, and he was wipin' it careful with his handkerchief. I heer'd him groan, an' when he lifted up his face I see as he were cryin'. Then he knelt down an' started prayin', an' I seed his poor old shoulders shakin' all the time, for there were more cryin' than prayin' in it, I reckon. Eh, 't is a hard thing for a man as hev' strove his best all his life to go to workh'us at the last.'

'I didn't mean it that way,' said Johnny apologetically. 'But we ain't all made alike. I 'd give what I could willin' to keep Gill from *it*.' For the life of him he could not utter the word. The 'workhouse' is a word which leaves a stain on honest lips.

The two men stood looking at one another mutely, and then their eyes insensibly travelled to Gill's tiny cottage at the end of the Green. There was no smoke rising from the chimney. A man was coming out of the door. He was tall, like Gill, but preternaturally thin. He wore a top-hat and was

dressed in black. His face had none of the ruddy country freshness; it was of a yellow pallor.

'That 's Gill's brother from Lunnon, by all accounts,' said Johnny. 'Maybe he 's come down to set things straight.'

The man came towards them, walking slowly, with downcast head.

Baxter addressed him, and the tall man stopped, looking at the two old men a trifle superciliously.

'We 're all a-feelin' it,' went on Baxter impetuously. ''T is a cruel thing for Gill to be sent there to die; an' if you 're his brother, as by all accounts you be, I pray God as you may be able to prevent it, sir.'

'Well,' said the tall man bitterly, 'I can't prevent it, so you may as well know it at once. I dare say you think that London 's a place paved with gold, an' because I 've come from London I 've money enough to do what I please. God knows that I 'm no better off than old Sol yonder. There 's a many of us in London that wears a decent black

coat, but there 's precious little shirt under it. I 've six children, an' one on 'em 's a cripple. Besides, in London we get out o' the way of hating the poorhouse like you country folk do. There was a man in our ware'ouse that went to the work'ouse, an' a year after had some money left 'im; but do you think he came out? Not he. He said he 'd never been so 'appy in his life, for he 'd got rid o' his worries, an' his wife, an' no money 'ud ever tempt him out again.'

The two old men looked at one another in speechless indignation. They had listened to a blasphemy against human nature.

'I 've heer'd tell,' said Baxter, his face aflame, 'that you Lunnon folk was a bad lot, an' now I know it. A man wi' the spirit o' a weevil would n't talk like that. Men like to you had n't ought to be born. Happy in the work-h'us! Good God, can a man be happy as lives nex' door to hell?'

The tall man winced and turned livid.

'Goin' to preach, are you, you two silly old Johnnys?' he said, with a mirthless laugh. 'Then I 'll be goin'. I never was fond of preachin', an' it 's so many years since I 'eard a sermon that I 'm afraid I could n't stand it.'

'If that 's the sort o' creature Lunnon makes,' said Baxter, as he watched the man in black moving leisurely away, 'I 'd rather starve where I be.'

''T is clean air, anyway,' said Johnny meditatively.

'That creature 's breathed dirt till his very soul 's dirty,' said Baxter. 'His inside 's like a choked chimbley.'

In Plumridge Green there was nothing talked of that day but the fate which hung over Solomon Gill. It was generally understood that he was to go to Barford workhouse the next afternoon. He had earned hardly anything through the winter, and was more than ever crippled by the rheumatism. There were a good many people who said they had always known that this would happen, and indeed it required but little

intuition to utter such a prophecy. The last earthly bourn of the broken-down labourer has always been the workhouse.

Late in the afternoon Mr. Potterbee and old Mr. Shannon were seen to enter the village and go straight to Gill's cottage. The news spread, and they were regarded as deliverers. Such a visit could only mean that Gill was to be rescued, and the eyes that watched the two men from twenty cottage windows had the same light in them that has been known to burn like a torch of joy in the eyes of beleaguered garrisons. There was not a man in Plumridge Green who would not have tossed up his hat for joy to know that Gill was saved.

Perhaps that long interview — for it lasted two hours — in Gill's cottage was the noblest chapter in all his simple life. It was a true epic of piety and honesty.

'There 's absolutely no need for you to go,' said old Mr. Potterbee, in his

soft voice, which always seemed to have a note of peace in it, as of distant silver bells, heard out of a starry silence.

'As long as you live, Gill, there are those of us who will see that you don't want.'

'Thank 'ee, kindly,' said Gill; ''t is a kind thought, sure enough, for 'ee to hev' for a poor old fellow like me, but 't is like this, sir, I could n't bring mysel' to take charity, not when there 's so many others as need it more. 'T is not that I 'm proud, sir, for the dear Lord 's always been a-givin' me things all my life, an' I ain't above takin' help from those as gives it for His sake. But there 's a many as needs it more nor me.'

'But they shall have help too, Gill. It 's not as if you were taking something from some one else.'

'No, I know that, sir. I know as you ain't the man to say, "Now I 've give to one o' the Lord's children, I can't give to no other." But I feel, all

the same, as it would n't be right for me to take it. An' if you would n't mind me a-suggestin' it, if you would give what you was a-goin' to allow me to poor old Betsy Blossom, over at Barnard's End, 't would be a real joy to me, sir; for she be bedridden, an' no one goes a-nigh her, her not bein' one o' the chapel-folk, an' she do need it more nor me.'

Mr. Potterbee wiped his eyes, and, turning to Mr. Shannon, said, 'Can't you say something to convince Gill we can't let him go?'

'Well, I was going to say,' said the minister, 'that we really can't spare Gill from the chapel. Think,' he said, turning to Gill, 'how much good you 've done among the people, and surely you 'll see that it 's your duty to stay with them.'

'I 've thought on that, too,' said Gill, and his lips trembled. 'But the Lord won't let His work stop for the want o' a poor old fellow like me. Besides, I be gettin' too old to do all I hev'

done, an' 't is time some on the younger chaps had a turn.'

'But the workhouse, Gill, the workhouse,' said Mr. Shannon solemnly. 'It 's too dreadful to think of you going there.'

'The dear Lord went lower nor that to save me,' said the old man, with an upward glance. 'I doubt as why we dread the 'Ouse so, is because there 's all sorts o' bad and worthless folk as get into it, and we feel a kind o' soil upon us to be found wi' them. But Jesus Christ, He would n't ha' felt like that; maybe the sort o' folk what 's there would ha' made Him all the readier to go among 'em.

'I 'll tell 'ee quite honest what I hev' thought about it all. I saw nigh on a year ago that this hour were a-comin', an' I prayed like the dear Lord as I might be saved from this hour. We Gills hev' always been honest folk, an' hev' died in our own beds, poor though we be. Many a night I hev' laid awake, an' sort o' seed this hour, like a big

black shadow, all whisht an' ghost-like, standin' in the corner o' the room, an' hev' heer'd it say, "I 'm a-comin', an' you can't escape Me." One night, I mind me, I could n't bear it no more, so I got out o' bed, an' went to the cupboard, an' got out all the little bits o' things my mother left me when she died. I felt as though I heer'd her sayin', "You 'll never let them things go inter strange hands, my sonny." An' it made me mad a'most to think o' it, an' I prayed as I might die first.

'After a long while I got into bed again, and what wi' bein' wore out with perplexity an' sorrow I fell asleep; an' then I had a dream. I thought as I saw that shadow in the corner move, an' it were as if it put up its arm, and drawed back a veil from its face. An' then I seed as the face were pale, an' the hand that were lifted up had a red wound in it, an' I someway knew as it were Christ. He looked at me sorrowful-like, an' said, "Solomon Gill, follow Me." An' then I seed Him a-goin'

straight to Barford Workh'us, an' enterin' a long whitewashed room where all sorts o' people lay asleep, an' their faces was mostly sad, and those what was wicked looked the saddest o' all. Then He says, "These also are My children; an' you must love them for My sake, an' sorely do they need some one as 'll love 'em, an' tell 'em as I hav' n't never forgotten 'em." I woke up at that, an' the first words on my lips was, "Yea, though I make my bed in hell, behold Thou art there." After that night I never saw that shadow in the corner no more, nor was afeard o' it. But I sometimes thought as that corner o' the room was brighter nor the others, as if there was a shinin' Cross as glimmered in it.'

The old man's face glowed as he spoke. He had never looked so much like a saint as in this hour of supreme renunciation.

'Well,' said Potterbee sadly, 'I see your mind 's made up, Gill, and if you feel 't is the Lord's will, I 've no more

to say. But I shall always feel 't is a disgrace to us to let you go.'

'Now don't 'ee go a-feelin' that way, sir,' he replied earnestly. 'Why, I shall know as you all love me jest the same, though I be in the 'Ouse. An' maybe I can do somethin' there for the Lord's wanderin' children. Paul, he preached in the prison to the prisoners, an' why should n't I speak a word for my dear Lord to the poor old folk in the 'Ouse as want comfortin', and have n't found no comfort in this weary world? Spirits in prison they be, sure enough!'

'Is there nothing we can do for you, then — before you go?'

'Well, yes; there 's two or dree little things, if you would n't mind.'

The old man went to the painted cupboard in the corner of the room, and unlocked the doors with a slow and lingering hand.

'There 's this chaney,' he said in a gentle voice. ''T were my mother's, an' as I 've heer'd her say 't was bought

when she married. That 'ud be a matter of eighty years agone, for I be close on seventy. If you 'ud kindly take it, sir, I 'd be very much obliged. It 'ud pain me sore to think o' it goin' anywheres, and like as not gettin' broke. An' there 's that there mission'ry-box. It hev' stood there on the mantel this forty year, an' I could n't bear to think as it 'ud never be full no more. For forty year the name o' Solomon Gill hev' been in the Mission'ry Report, an' now 't won't be there no more. I 'll allow as that do trouble me — '

He took the box from the shelf, handling it tenderly. There were tears in his eyes.

' She do feel rare and lightish,' he said, with the air of an expert. ' But I did n't expect no other. 'T is but little I hev' been able to do this year. Still, I do hope as there 's a matter o' two pound or so in her.'

He seemed to have forgotten his visitors in his contemplation of the box. He was turning it round in his hands,

listening to the rattle of the money, and talking to himself like a man in a dream.

Potterbee rose, his face suffused with emotion.

'Give me the box, Gill,' he said. 'This, at least, shall not go into other hands, or have another name. We will keep it as "Solomon Gill's box" as long as God spares you, an' you need n't fear but that it shall be kept full.'

The old man breathed an air of relief.

''T is real good of you, sir,' he said. 'I 'll confess, now you 've said what you hev', that I was more troubled over that mission'ry money than anythin' else. I did n't want the Lord's work to suffer because Solomon Gill were gone. But now that 's all put right, why, I 've nothin' else to wish for. I can say truthful, "Now, Lord, lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace."'

The two visitors rose to leave the cottage. They looked round the room with more than the common sadness that men feel in seeing familiar things

for the last time. A painted dresser ran along one wall; in the corner next it stood the cupboard, and next the cupboard a little oak table, on which Gill's Bible lay open, with his spectacles laid beside it. In the low latticed window were ranged last year's geraniums. A black pot swung on the crook over the wood fire. Beside the fire was the settle, where Gill used to read of an evening when his work was done. On a little shelf near the window were the Reports of the Missionary Society for forty years, all in order; not one was missing.

By the end of the week all would be changed. The cottage was already let, for cottages were scarce in Plumridge Green. Every trace of a human life, once sheltered by those four walls, would be wiped out, as with a sponge.

'God bless you, Gill,' stammered the minister. It was all that either could say. They wrung the old man's hand and went out quickly into the falling dusk.

At the corner of the Green that gave upon the Barford road, a little group waited for them. They were mostly chapel-folk, who had known Gill all their lives.

'Well, sir, we do hope as you hev' put it all right,' said Button, who was their spokesman. 'Tell us that Gill ain't a-goin'.'

'He 's made his mind up to go,' said Potterbee sadly.

There was a sigh of consternation in the little crowd.

'Eh, but 't is terrible cruel,' said some one. 'An' he a good, honest, God-fearin' man all his life. 'T will be a terrible disgrace for he.'

'There 's some men you can't disgrace,' said the minister, 'and Gill's one of them.'

Some of them felt the truth of the remark, but for most it was almost unintelligible. The terror of the poor-house is the most vital terror which the poor man knows. Nothing can eradicate the idea of indelible disgrace that

is associated with it. There was not one of them who would not cheerfully have died rather than have trodden the road that Gill was to take on the morrow.

In the morning every eye in the village kept a watch on Gill's cottage. At ten o'clock a farm-cart drew up at the door, and Gill's simple furniture was piled in it. There was not much of it. At the top of the pile was seen the table where the missionary deputations had been royally fed for forty anniversaries. Davy Lumsden recognised it from afar, and felt as Jonah would have felt if Nineveh had not repented.

The cart moved away, and no one had the curiosity to ask what had become of Gill's brother. It was popularly supposed that he had bought Gill's furniture for a song, and sold it to a dealer in Barford, making enough by the transaction to pay his fare back to London.

It was noticed at twelve o'clock that a thin smoke was rising from Gill's

chimney. The deduction was that he was engaged in cooking his last meal in the dismantled room. The door of the cottage stood ajar, for the morning was fine and warm, and some one passing at half-past twelve reported that Gill was saying grace for his food. The words he used were those he had used all his life: 'We thank Thee, O Lord, who hast given us all things richly to enjoy.'

It was two in the afternoon when he appeared at the door. He was dressed in the old blue coat with brass buttons, which had been his Sunday attire for a lifetime. He had a small bundle, tied up with a red cotton handkerchief, in one hand, and a stout stick in the other. He looked wistfully across the Green to the little chapel, and then turned to look through the cottage window once more.

Baxter and Johnny Button, and a dozen of the chapel-folk, who had been waiting for this moment, crossed the Green, and solemnly shook the old

man's hand. They formed into a straggling procession behind him. They were all silent, for they had the sense that they were attending Gill's funeral.

A mile away, at the top of the hill, the procession halted. From that point the grim walls of Barford Workhouse could be seen.

Gill stood quite silent regarding them for a moment. He then began to fumble in his pocket, at last producing his well-worn tuning-fork.

'Friends,' said he, 'let us remember the Lord's mercies once more before we part. 'T is a sad road I 'm takin', but the dear Lord trod a sadder road for me.'

He struck the key-note, and with a preliminary cough, raised the tune. The words were the Doxology, and the tune Old Hundred.

# XIV

## AN INNOCENT IMPOSTOR

EVEN the quietest backwaters of life have their occasional sensations, and for that matter I have no doubt that the social politics confined within the round of a dew-drop would prove of supreme interest, if we had any means of comprehending them. The old Meeting-house at Barford was certainly one of the quietest places on earth. He who passed under the brick archway which opened on its pebbled square, across which ran one narrow paved path to the Meeting-house, and another to the manse, insensibly became the citizen of a realm of peace. The very oak that grew in the centre of this enclosed square had a cloistral sedateness of appearance, and on the windiest day, when boughs were snap-

ping everywhere in the open country-side, it indulged only in a subdued murmur of protesting foliage. Yet once the old Meeting-house was the centre of profound perturbation, and its cause was old Mary Maybury.

There had always been a touch of innocent mystery about Mary, because the most diligent inquisition had entirely failed to discover what were her real means of support. She lived in a very tiny house on the road to Plumridge Green, and quite alone. She had no friends in Barford, and apparently cared to make none. Few people saw anything of her during the week, but on Sundays she never failed to join the congregation at the Meeting-house. She sat in a corner seat, far back under the gallery, and followed the service with devout attention. When she had first come to the Meeting-house, there had been a lively discussion in the Dorcas Society upon her claims to gentility. Two or three female inquisitors of more than usually sagacious minds

had caused themselves to be shown into her seat on Sundays, on purpose to study her dress, which they grudgingly acknowledged to be real 'morry antik.' But they also reported that it was much frayed in the folds, and must have been made at least twenty years before, and showed indisputable signs of having been turned more than once. Moreover, it was clear that this was the only dress of any importance which she possessed, since no one had ever seen her appear in public in any other. This fact settled the question of Mary's position in society. It was clear that she was only a poor person with one good dress.

From this time she quietly faded out of notice. Occasionally a strange minister, taking a day's services at Barford, happened to observe her, and asked who that lady with the soft grey hair and dark eyes was? The answer would be, 'Oh, that 's only old Mary Maybury'; and if he happened to be a discerning man he recognised that he had

committed a social blunder. There is a world of force in the word 'only,' when it is uttered in an intonation of grieved surprise, to the accompaniment of lifted eyebrows and the clatter of 'bugles' shaken on scornful black bonnets.

Now, it happened that one day after service Mary was seen to go into the vestry, instead of gliding out of her seat silently in her usual fashion, and going meekly home to her little house on the Plumridge road. This might have been forgotten as a passing eccentricity, but the next Sunday the same thing happened again. On this Sunday the grocer (Mumsley) followed her into the vestry, and it was noticed that the door was shut for half an hour.

During the following week it was observed that Mary called twice at the manse and once at Mumsley's. The week after she was seen going to the Red House. A day or two later it was reported that Priscilla Splashett had gone to Mary's house, and it was be-

lieved she had taken tea there. On Thursday, which was Mumsley's day for driving round the villages to the north of Barford, he was met late in the evening jogging along the Plumridge road, which was entirely out of his way, and it was certain that he tied his pony to Mary's gate, and was closeted with her quite ten minutes.

Mumsley's wife, who was noted for keeping her lord and master in proper order, of course heard of these proceedings, and was betrayed into strong language on the subject.

'I 'd like to know what you mean by collogueing with Mary Maybury?' she said.

'It 's business,' said Mumsley, in his most impressive ecclesiastical manner, 'business (ahem) connected with the church.'

'Fiddlesticks,' she retorted. 'You don't tell me that your proper way home from Colbury is round Plumridge Green, or that church business is so pressing you must needs be out after

dark at Mary Maybury's to do it. What 's she got to do with church business?'

'Maria,' he said solemnly, 'you surely ain't jealous of old Mary?'

'Jealous, indeed! I 'm surprised, Mumsley, you should say such a thing. Not but what Mary is n't near as old as she looks, for all her hair 's grey. 'T is my belief you 've got some secret betwixt you, an' I 'll be bound it is n't creditable to you.'

'The minister knows all about it,' said Mumsley, with a deprecatory shake of the head.

'Then all the more shame to him is what I say. I shall tell him on Sunday that I 'm not going to have my man a-collogueing with no Mary Mayburys, church business or no church business. I give you warnin' that if this goes on I 'm goin' to be nasty, Mumsley. I ain't often nasty, but when I am — '

'You are nasty, Maria,' Mumsley said dryly.

At this point Mumsley, foreseeing the end, took his wife into his confidence, the immediate result of which was that the next evening Mary took tea with the Mumsleys, and by the end of the week her story was all over the place.

The scene next Sunday at the Meeting-house was quite dramatic. People stared at Mary with unaffected curiosity, and after service many persons who had never spoken to her in their lives pressed forward to shake her hand.

'Have 'ee heard anythin' of him?' one and another whispered. To which Mary replied only with a patient upward glance of her fine eyes and a shake of her head.

'To think,' said one of the group at the Meeting-house door, as they watched her passing out under the archway, 'that old Mary should hev' a husband all the time, and him one that has sat at the table wi' the great ones o' the earth.'

'Companion to a lord, weren't he?'

'Bosom companion, by all accounts. As fine an' handsome a man as ever were. Mumsley hev' seen his portrait, an' says as he do look the ginelman every inch.'

'But a bad 'un, I 'm told.'

'Ay, ay, a rare bad 'un, — like to Jereboam, the son of Nebat, who made Israel to sin. Even so hev' he led that poor young lord into all sorts o' mischief, till last o' all — '

'Lords is a weak lot,' interposed Simon Tann, who lost no opportunity of declaring his democratic sentiments. 'Here an' there you finds a good 'un, but they 're mostly like a spindly radish-bed that wants thinning out.'

'Some do say as it were the lord as were Mary's husband.'

'No, no, that don't stand to reason, nohow. He were a squire's son, howiver, an' married her when she was a young girl, an' then runned away from her, to go off with this poor young lord into all kinds o' wickedness. 'T is grief as hev' made her 'air so white.'

'It turned in a single night, I've heard tell.'

'You don't say? Well, I've heard o' it turning quick, but never so quick as that. Moastly it falls out. I know'd a man whose head was as bald as an egg. He were a police, an' he said as his head were like it were, all through anxiety to catch some one a-doin' somethin' they had n't oughter do, and would n't do nohow. He said as it were the moral condition o' the masses as made him bald.'

'Well,' said the member of the Dorcas Society who had first spread the report about the 'morry antik' dress being frayed at the folds, 'for my part, I always knew as old Mary were a lady. You never see a common person in a dress like she do wear, unless she 've stole it, an' then she 'd be afeard to wear it.'

The little group dispersed, and in many a quiet house at Barford that day there was animated conversation on the romantic wrongs of Mary Maybury.

When Mr. Shannon preached in the evening upon the subject of the heart knowing its own bitterness, it was felt at once that he had Mary in his eye, and at one point in the sermon there was something as near a murmur of sympathetic approval as etiquette permitted.

But while Barford knew enough of Mary's story to feel an entirely changed sentiment toward her, it was very far from knowing all. Mr. Shannon and Priscilla Splashett were the recipients of her closest confidences. The day when Mary first entered the vestry, and asked the minister to read a letter which she produced from her purse, was merely the first act in a long drama. The letter bore no postmark, and purported to come from Amsterdam. It was from her husband, and stated that he was ill and penniless, Lord Cleveland having gone on to Vienna. It hinted darkly that there were reasons why he could not return to England, that in this illness he had seen the

error of his ways, and that only twenty pounds was needed to insure in him a complete change of life.

The minister was bewildered. This collation of titled names and distant cities with humble Mary Maybury took his breath away. But no doubt as to the truth of her story crossed his mind. There was something in the very attitude of the woman who stood before him so pathetically helpless and imploring, that he was deeply touched. He had often heard Bunting of Belchester speak of the strange dramas of human life that had been revealed to him in his city pastorate, and now he felt, with an almost pleasurable thrill of astonishment, that he himself was touching the depths of a human tragedy. Besides which, there is a subtle happiness in being made the confidant of a long-concealed secret, an implied compliment in being asked to advise upon a tangled problem. Mr. Shannon gave one look at the troubled figure that stood before him, and almost thanked

God out of his simple heart that the opportunity had been given him to do something for one of the world's many victims of injustice and wrong.

'But why did he leave you?' he asked timidly.

'I loved him, but he never loved me,' said Mary, with a burst of tears. 'He didn't believe in religion, and wouldn't let me go to church — that was the first difference between us. He took all my money — I was glad for him to have it. Oh, if you could have seen him as he then was — so young, so handsome.'

'But how have you lived all these years?'

Mary blushed deeply, and hung her head.

'I know I can trust you, sir,' she said. 'I wouldn't have any one know this for the world. I write tales for the "Saturday Comet." They're poor stuff, — nothing I would like you to read; but they're the best I can do. And almost all I earn I send to him. . . .

I sent him a hundred pounds last year, and had only thirty left for myself. I know he gambles with it, but he might be driven to something worse without it. Ah, if you only knew my Philip, you would know, sir, that a woman could not help loving him, whatever wrong he had done her. You would understand how gladly she would work her fingers to the bone for him.'

She covered her face with her hands, and sobbed. Mr. Shannon's own eyes were wet. He bitterly blamed himself that this woman should have been in his congregation so long, and that he had scarcely called on her more than once. What magnanimity — to work night and day to support a husband who despised her! Of what patient heroism women were capable! There were truly more saints in the world than the world suspects, and Mary Maybury was one of them.

The next day two books were left at the manse. They were novels republished from the pages of the 'Saturday

Comet.' No doubt they were poor stuff, but the minister, who had scarcely read a novel in his life, read them through with eager interest, finding the secret of unheard of magnanimity in every line.

That same evening Priscilla Splashett called. It seemed that Mrs. Maybury had revealed to her that morning the latest phase of her tragic story. Philip was in England. Lord Cleveland, who was his evil genius, had again discovered him. It seemed that the two men had been implicated in some gigantic swindle, and arrest was imminent. What if Philip should come to Barford? Ought they to conceal him for Mary's sake, until he could be safely smuggled out of England?

Here was a dilemma for a sober dissenting minister, and an aged single lady of spotless name. But they were both so completely under the spell of Mary Maybury that they actually discussed whether, in such a case, they would not be justified in using the loft

of the Meeting-house as a hiding-place for a hunted man who only wanted twenty pounds to lead an entirely new life.

When it was quite dark they stole out like conspirators, and went to Mary's cottage. Mary met them with the most tragic look of fear upon her face.

'Hush,' she said, laying her finger on her lip, 'I have seen him.'

'He 's not been here?' whispered the horror-struck minister.

'Yes,' she replied in a faint voice. 'Oh, it is as I always thought it was. He has been more sinned against than sinning. It was Lord Cleveland who led him into crime. Oh, my husband, my husband!'

She laid her head upon the table, and sobbed softly, as if afraid of being overheard. When she lifted her face there was a fine light upon it.

'I 've given him everything I have,' she said. 'There 's not a penny in the house. He 's had it all. But, oh, he richly paid me for all that I 've done

for him! He kissed me — the first kiss for twenty years. And, thank God, he 's safe. He 's gone on to St. Colam, and by to-morrow noon will be on his way to America. O my Philip! How changed he was, — so pale and thin, and his hair quite white! I shall never see him any more on earth, but I will pray to meet him in heaven.'

Priscilla Splashett was profoundly touched. She felt that a woman of such a noble order as this deserved her warmest friendship. She had vague ideas of devoting her future life to her consolation. She invited the forlorn woman to come and stay with her at the Red House for a few days.

The next morning Mary Maybury became a guest at the Red House, and her social distinction was assured. When she came to service next Sunday, and sat in the big baize-lined pew, between Dorcas and Priscilla Splashett, any doubts as to her real gentility were finally laid at rest.

But, as it turned out, this social tri-

umph was her undoing. For that very morning it happened that lawyer Trevarton who usually went to church with a fine eye for keeping on good terms with his church clients, while his wife looked after his less important business interests among the Meeting-house folk, came to hear Mr. Shannon. He knew every one in Barford, and noticed at once the presence of Mary Maybury in the Splashett's pew. After service he said to his wife, as they walked home, 'Was n't that old Mary Maybury sitting with the Splashetts?'

'Yes, it was.'

'Well, that 's a new move, is n't it? What does it mean?'

Mrs. Trevarton told him all she knew, concluding with the statement that Mary was an authoress, who wrote stories in the 'Saturday Comet.'

Trevarton laughed long and loud. 'I 'll wager she never had a line of hers printed in her life,' he said. 'You must be a lot of ninnies to swallow that tale.'

On the Monday, as he was looking over some papers before going to Belchester, his eye caught the name of Loveridge. 'Why that 's the man,' he thought, 'who is editor of the Comet. If I get a chance I 'll look him up today, and ask him to show me the works of Mary Maybury. It strikes me it 'll be a good joke.'

When he came back at night he said to his wife, 'Well, you 'll be pleased to hear that they 've never heard the name of Mary Maybury at the Comet office. As for the books you showed me, they were written by a clergyman's daughter in Barchester, whose name is well known. As they are published anonymously, I suppose old Mary thought there would be no danger in laying claim to them.'

The next day Mrs. Trevarton imparted this intelligence to the minister. He was much puzzled, and went at once to see Priscilla Splashett.

'Well, I 've thought it a little curious that I 've never seen Mary writing

anything during the week she's been here,' said Priscilla cautiously.

Just at this moment Mary came into the room, and there must have been something in the altered aspect of the two faces turned toward her that warned her. She turned very pale. 'I hope you have n't brought me any bad news,' she murmured.

'Only this,' said Mr. Shannon, speaking in a high strained voice; 'that you told me you wrote for the Comet, and the editor says he never heard of you.'

'Yes,' she said faintly, 'that was a mistake.'

'Was there anything else in what you said that was a mistake?' said the minister sternly.

There was a moment of terrible silence. Then, all at once, there was a rustle of the 'morry antik' dress, and the trembling woman fell upon her knees. She knelt against the table, and covered her face with her hands.

'Oh, you will never forgive me,' she

wailed. 'It was none of it true — not a word. I never had a husband. . . . Years ago I lived in a house as lady's maid and knew a man called Philip Maybury. The rest . . . I made it up.'

'But why? Why should you indulge in such deception?'

'I was very lonely. No one spoke to me. And my heart ached for sympathy. I wanted to know people . . . to feel that some one cared for me a little. When I first came to you, sir, I did not intend to go so far. But the story I told grew upon me, till I half believed it . . . and then I durst n't go back. It was such a new sweet thing for a lonely woman like me to be loved and pitied . . . that . . . that I felt . . .' Her voice failed, and she sobbed pitifully.

'You must leave this house at once,' said Priscilla, her voice trembling with anger.

'Yes, I will, ma'am,' she answered meekly. 'But I 'll never forget your kindness. . . . It 'll be something to

remember in the long lonely days that lie before me.'

'Perhaps she 's to be pitied after all,' said the minister.

But Priscilla only regarded him with a haughty frown. She swept out of the room, and went upstairs to see that Mary put 'her things' together at once. As she went she said to herself, 'A woman like that is capable of stealing the silver spoons if she is n't watched.'

It was many months before Mary was seen in the Meeting-house again, and when she came she sat with humbled head in her old pew under the gallery. People wondered what it all meant, but even Trevarton had pity on her, and held his tongue. It was not until Mary Maybury was laid in her lonely grave, on the cold side of Barford churchyard, that the true facts of her imposture became known, and by that time they were only visible through the softened perspectives of time and compassion.

# XV

## RUE WITH A DIFFERENCE

IT seemed a peculiarity of the clear quiet air of Barford that it gave a certain flavour of individuality to human character, an aromatic pungency, as it were. From the large outside world of multitudinous cities that air borrowed not a ripple or a tremor, and so human character had time to crystallise slowly into forms that were singularly definite and stable. Naturally, mere outside visitors saw nothing of this, and rarely suspected it. They were agreed in calling Barford a dull little town. They saw certain homely figures pass up and down the streets — sometimes Johnny Button, with his shambling walk and wise smile, sometimes Davy Lumsden, with his air of melancholy reproach against the universe at large, and at all times Sammy Nunn, the postman, with

his quick perky amble and monstrous air of self-importance — and they smiled with town-bred pity. They had much of the feeling that a child has in inspecting an ant-hill: it is a curious thing, and unlikely facts are told about it, but it is all very small, and its bustle of minute life quite beneath notice. Now and again a slightly keener eye discerned something quaint about these Barford men and women, but the vision was rare and fugitive. Upon the whole, the visitor was quite sure that he would find life insupportable in such a place.

Perhaps he was right, for in these quiet places of the earth life does not jig and strut upon a stage, but opens itself slowly to the eye, with the fine reticence of the grey dawn, and moves slowly like its own level rivers, and does not imagine itself either capable or worthy of deliberate notice. So, no doubt, it all seems dull enough to eyes scorched by gaslight, and brains debased and robbed of edge by the continuous perusal of the daily paper. Yet

there is one thing that the most casual visitor might remember, viz., that even as the tiniest moorland pool can reflect the sky and the stars quite as perfectly as the widest ocean, so the prime elements of human nature exist in unabated vitality and strength in these more secluded corners of the world. Indeed, it may be further argued, and with truth, that, if you want human nature in its elemental freshness, it is in such retreats as these that you must seek it. Of this at least be sure, that human life in all its pain and passion, its agonies of baffled love, and vehement revolt, and dry-eyed endurance of wasting secret grief, is not confined alone to the swarming hive of cities. These things happen also in the places we call dull.

Of course it does not follow that these Barford folk were all of equal interest: there were the noticeable and the unnoticeable, as elsewhere, and the discriminating eye was needed in a right apprehension of their qualities and vir-

tues. For example, Sammy Nunn, the postman, was quite an unnoticeable little man, in spite of his importance as a public functionary, and his own extravagant estimate of that importance.

But not so Simon Dellow, the blacksmith, working like a lonely Vulcan at his forge near Plumridge Common. Even strangers, stopping for a moment at the forge, recognised a primeval shapeliness about the labouring giant, and the village children scattered in terror at the smouldering malice of his eye. Because there was no better smith for miles round, Dellow did a thriving trade; but there was something in the grim taciturnity of the huge man that made the forge a place of fear. Even Davy Lumsden, who boasted that he rarely paid for anything its proper price, never ventured to dispute over halfpence with Dellow. On one occasion, indeed, he had been known in his trepidation to pay Dellow twopence too much, rather than endure any longer

the scathing criticisms of his own character which Dellow uttered as he pushed his mended wheelbarrow toward him. Dellow afterwards nailed the two coins to the wall of his forge, where he often pointed them out to Davy's intimates as the only coins ever extracted from Davy's pocket without a just equivalent.

Swart and brawny, terrible and lonely, the great smith often laboured on far into the night, for the most part engaged in fashioning a certain pair of iron gates of intricate design for the squire; and pray who was to guess that Simon Dellow was beating out his heart upon his anvil, and was putting all the repressed passion of a baffled love into this endless midnight task of his? Fear and strength dwelt visibly beside that glowing forge, but one would not have supposed that love tarried there too. Yet those who could recall a certain episode of forty years before might have guessed the secret of Dellow's lonely life and untamed nature; and they would

have seen what the blacksmith always saw, — the face of Margaret Nunn for ever outlined in the red blaze, and her form for ever moving in the shadows of the forge.

Margaret Nunn — Margy, as she was generally called — was one of those women whose very appearance makes town-bred people tired of streets. She was as truly a pastoral product as the large-eyed cows you could see any June morning clustered in the shadow of Barford bridge, and shared with them a wise passivity. She would have been a very beautiful old lady if suitably arrayed, though some of us thought nothing could possibly have toned better with her apple-coloured cheeks than the spotless white sun-bonnet which she wore for at least eight months of the year. Even her plain print dress had a certain noble grace about its folds, an antique largeness and severity of line. Margy, going up the Plumridge road on a fresh summer morning, with her basket of dew-sprinkled flowers on her

arm, seemed a part of Nature herself, a large-limbed Eve who had always lived in a garden.

Sammy Nunn, the postman, was very proud of his mother, as he had every reason to be. He often indulged in private reflections on the subject which were good for his soul, since they nourished in him the temper of humility; although they were entirely destitute of public significance.

'T is queer a woman like her should only ha' had one child, an' such a little 'un as I be. 'T is mortal queer. I 'd oughter to ha' been bigger, I did,' was the sum of these reflections.

Sammy, even when his beard grew, still had to lift his chin a trifle to kiss this majestic mother of his. By way of adjusting matters he had married a very small woman, for whom he had never been able to cultivate a proper respect. 'But then,' as he said, 'it were n't likely as I could ha' found another woman like mother, an' if I had, I should ha' been dreadful afeard to ha' married her.

Women do run small now-a-days, an' 't is convenienter as they should to match the men. An', arter all, small pertaties eat just so well as big 'uns.'

Sammy, whose course of life tended to a philosophic consideration of the human passions, owing to his constant commerce in love letters, often found himself reflecting on his mother in her capacity of a woman to be wooed and loved, and usually with astonishment and wonder. Sammy had never known his father, but the gossip of Barford had long ago delicately hinted to him that he was a ne'er-do-well. Margy Nunn never spoke of her dead husband. She seemed to be so perfectly content without masculine attentions, that it was difficult to imagine that they had ever meant anything to her. Yet there must have been one or two persons in Barford who could remember the day, long before her marriage with 'Ostler Nunn' — as he was known — when Margy had danced on Plumridge Green one May-day with Simon Dellow. Dellow,

the blacksmith, was in those days a young and handsome Hercules, and many people had said on that May-day that a finer sight was never seen than Margy and he dancing together under the bluest of blue skies, and with the stateliest grace. Every one prophesied a marriage within the year. But for some reason which was not explained, it never happened. It was supposed that there had been a deadly quarrel between the two; anyway, soon afterwards Margy married 'Ostler Nunn,' whose fondness for 'the drink,' was well known. Soon after Sammy's birth 'Ostler Nunn' died, and since then Margy — had been Margy. She grew flowers as no one else could grow them, and sold them in the market-place twice a week. There was no sort of rare plant that she could not coax into vigorous life in her little sweet-smelling garden. Age came on her without altering anything, except that the thick bands of hair turned from gold to silver. Her face retained all its apple-coloured

freshness, and her form all its gracious poise and dignity. Dellow, in so far as the orbit of his life had for a moment intersected Margaret's, had dropped completely out of memory.

Now it happened one June morning as Margy stood in the market-place behind her flowers, Johnny Button and Davy Lumsden stopped near her stall. Their backs were turned to Margy, and they were approaching by deliberate stages a condition of human intercourse. They had already made brief remarks upon the weather and the crops, and had pronounced verdicts, in the shape of curt adjectives, on three of their neighbours. Suddenly Johnny said, 'Heard about Dellow?'

'I seed 'en last night,' said Davy.

'Lor' now, you don't say; what did 'en look like now?'

'Baddish, powerful baddish. Should n't ha' know'd 'en.'

'How did it happen? Do 'ee tell us now.'

'The old tale, workin' late o' night,

all by hisself, at them fan-dangle iron gates o' his'n. 'T is supposed as somethin' in the fire jumped out an' blinded him. Anyway, blind he is, an' blind he 'll be, an' them gates he 's been a-making for Squire all these years won't ever be finished now. Dellow 's stone-blind, he is.'

' 'T is sad,' said Johnny. ' An' him such a big man too.'

' So you's ha' said if you ha' seed 'en, Johnny — sittin' all alone he were, wi' his 'ands folded on his knees, an' groanin' awful. " Don't none o' you meetin'ers come here a caterwaulin' over me," says he. " I don't want to hear none o' your talk about God doin' what He do think best. There ain't no God. An' there ain't no heaven, though it 's like enough there 's a hell. You go back and sing hymns till the day when you 're struck blind, an' come an' tell me what sorter hymns you do feel like singin' then." '

' 'T is a pity Gill is in the 'Ouse,' said Johnny gloomily. ' If Gill could ha'

called on him, maybe as he might ha' done him some good.'

'Gill could n't ha' done more 'en I did,' said Davy severely. 'I telled him it were his sins as had found him out. I talked to 'en real honest, but he was most blasphemious. 'T is my belief he 'd ha' struck me if he 'd know'd where to strike.'

'Ah, 't is n't every one ha' got your talent for talkin' to the sick, Davy,' said Johnny. 'I 'll be bound now you felt yourself like a sorter John before Herod? '

'I did,' said Davy, without the least appreciation of Johnny's irony. 'An' I let 'en have it straight. I ain't the man to shut my mouth when 't is a duty to open 'en.'

Johnny smiled, remembering that there was a day not very long before when Davy had only been too glad to be a very dumb prophet indeed in the presence of Dellow.

'An' Dellow, he swore. Well, well,' said Johnny, with a keen enjoyment of

the situation. Davy Lumsden as a prophet denouncing the sins of poor blind Dellow was one of the things that came to Johnny 'funny-like.'

The dialogue would no doubt have extended itself to many interesting questions of theology and morals, but at that moment a voice thrilled both men, and caused them to look round. Margaret Nunn had spoken. She was standing very erect behind her flowers, and all the soft apple-bloom had faded from her cheeks.

'What 's that you was a-sayin' of? What 's that about Dellow?'

'Ah, good-mornin', Margy,' said Davy with deliberation. 'I was just a-goin' to tell you those seeds o' yourn ain't turned out so well as were expected. They 're powerful slow a-comin' up, an' —'

'Never mind the seeds,' she said with an impatient gesture, that seemed to make her twenty years younger. 'What 's that I heerd you sayin' about Dellow?'

'Oh, Dellow 's blind, stone-blind. I

thought you 'd hev' know'd. 'T is in the paper this mornin'. "Shocking accident at a forge," — ah, here it is,' said Davy, pulling the 'Belchester News' from his pocket.

'I can't read. Read it to me,' she said imperiously.

Davy felt for his spectacles, which it took him some time to find. He then read the paragraph aloud with cutting and deliberate emphasis. It ended with the words, 'The unfortunate man lives quite alone, and is supposed to be without friends.'

'Thank you,' said Margy quietly, when the reading was done. The apple-bloom was beginning to steal back into her cheeks. Her voice startled the two men by the rich vibration of its tone. Her eyes, usually so calm, had a strange light in them. There was a soul no one had known anything of for forty years looking out of them: and there is a sunrise of the soul as well as of the firmament.

The next day Sammy Nunn, clamber-

ing over a stile which led to a farmhouse where he had left a letter, saw a white sun-bonnet moving rapidly like a big white moth between the hedges of the Plumridge road.

'I 'm blessed if that ain't mother,' he observed. 'I wonder what she 's goin' to Plumridge Green for at this time o' day.'

Margy was indeed on her way to Plumridge Green, walking fast with her usual ample stride. She carried a basket of flowers in her hand, pinks and roses piled in profusion, and on the top of all a sprig of the little yellow-flowered rue, which she had coaxed to growth in a stony corner of her garden. Her face had lost its calm — the calm as of still water — it was water ruffled. There was something of touching timidity, of tender cunning in her aspect. She kept close to the hedge as if afraid of being observed. Her lips were closed firmly, under the stress of some intense emotion.

Sammy watched her with some as-

tonishment, but postal duties are arranged without reference to human emotions, and he dared not follow her. If he had, he would have been still more astonished.

After a while she left the road, just where the Plumridge houses began, and took a path across the moor, which described a semicircle round the village. Leaving this, she came out upon the St. Colam end of the village, and at length arrived at a point where four roads met. The place was very solitary, even on this bright fine day. A great elm towered in the windless air. Beneath it lay some rusty ploughshares and a broken harrow. A silent forge, with shuttered windows, like closed eyes, completed the scene.

Beside the deserted forge sprawled a low, whitewashed house. The door was open, and the latticed window fastened back. A pair of hens had taken possession of the brick doorstep. A cock, surprised at his own audacity, and waiting for applause, strutted inside the

doorway, and surveyed the room contemptuously. There was no one to drive him out, and he knew it.

Margy stepped softly to the open window, and looked in. But softly as she trod she was overheard, and a deep bass voice shouted, 'Who's there?' She made no reply.

'If it's some o' you young devils up to your tricks again, I'll catch you for sure this time, an' skin you,' shouted the voice.

Margy trembled violently. Looking through the open window, she saw seated in a great arm-chair beside the fireless grate the man she had loved forty years before. His huge form seemed attenuated; the bulk was there still, but the aspect of strength was gone. His large hands hung listlessly; the very springs and sinews of his frame seemed loosened. His dark face had deep lines scored across the brow and round the mouth. The head was massive, almost splendid. But the close-curling black hair was now a dusty grey. The shaggy eyebrows

stood out wrathfully. His shirt, unbuttoned at the neck, showed his hairy chest, and the magnificent moulding of his throat. The eyes were closed: they would never see again. Under the deep hollows of these projecting brows were two dark spots of shadow, — the abodes of night.

'Simon Dellow!'

She uttered the words so softly that they seemed only a sigh.

The man started, and stood up. His face worked fearfully. Great drops of sweat stood upon his forehead.

'My God, don't mock me,' he cried. 'The darkness is all alive with faces. I hear voices: they come and go like a wind. Am I mad, as well as blind? The voices come and go like little flames. They burn me.'

Margy had moved from the window to the doorway, and stood there trembling. Then she suddenly gathered courage, and stepped across the threshold. She came as near as she dared to the man, and put her flowers down

upon the table. His sense of smell, sharpened by his loss of sight, instantly perceived them. Stretching out his hand, he touched the cool, dewy flowers, the roses, the pinks, the rue. He lifted them one by one to his face with the simple wonder of a child. It was he who trembled now.

But Margy could bear no more. She fled. Had any one happened to pass the most unfrequented path of the moor that afternoon, he would have seen this large-limbed, mild-eyed woman, with her thick bands of silver hair, sitting among the green bracken, weeping and laughing like any hysteric girl.

A hundred memories, at once poignant and tender, shook her as she gave full play to her emotions. Not far away was the very green where she had danced with Dellow forty years before. She heard again the keen thrill of the violin, the clamant voice of the cornet, the thud of rhythmic feet on the green turf. The movement of the wind in the woodland came to her ear like the rustle and

swish of skirts in the motion of the dance, soft laughter shook the air, and the clatter of excited voices. When a blackbird ran over its mellow bravura in the wood, it was as though a human voice had sounded. She almost saw the whirling figures on the Green, as men have talked of seeing insubstantial forms of ghost or fay dancing in the wooded hollows of the moonlit midnight forests. All the time she saw also another thing, — a dark, blind face, a thing dreadful and pitiful to see; and she heard a hoarse voice, full of pain, crying to her out of the pit of Time and Calamity.

She had no skill to read or analyse her own thoughts. All she knew was that her soul still clave to Simon Dellow, and that it would cleave to him for ever.

The beams of light had already begun to lie level on the earth when she rose. The June day was wearing to its radiant end. The light fell on a little pool a few yards away, and a curious fancy

seized her. She knelt beside the golden water, and, stooping over it, scanned eagerly her own face.

'Ah, but I be old, too old for love,' she whispered. But with the next breath she said, 'Still I love 'en. An' there 's one thing, he won't never see how old I be.' And the sunset, shining on her face, transfigured it, so that no one but herself would have thought her too old for love. In that moment she looked young with the eternal youth of the affections.

The afternoon wore away also for Dellow, but the sunlight brought him no joy. Left to himself, he sat handling the flowers in his lap with the same air of vacant wonder which he had at first displayed. The fowls had again taken possession of the doorstep, and the cochin cock boldly preened himself within a yard of the blind man's knee. There was no sound in the room except the buzzing of a large fly, engaged in an irritable study of the phenomenon of transparency, as represented in the window-pane.

The man's thoughts were boiling in his brain. Every now and then he seemed to see something clearly, as one sees a glittering peak suddenly emerge from the caldron of the mountain mists, hang suspended for an instant, and then vanish like a tinted bubble. Since his accident such rage and passion had possessed him, that his fear of madness was better justified than he imagined. In the vague darkness which surrounded him all was spectral and unreal, and his simplest impressions had been intensified into terrifying poignancy.

He tried in vain to distinguish what had happened to him. The flowers seemed real: touching them, he seemed to hold on to sanity. But the voice, — was it fiend's or woman's? He had scarcely learned to move a step in the horror of physical gloom which compassed him. A fear of pitfalls, precipices, yawning chasms, overcame him, and turned him sick. Was that voice which spoke his name the lure of some ghostly enemy . . .

the whisper of the fiend tempting him to the abyss?

'Simon Dellow!' Surely there had been pity, softness, love in that sigh which had travelled through the stillness and the dark. Something vaguely recognisable, half-familiar too. It might come again. All his senses were now knit together in a passionate effort to listen. It seemed as if the drums of the ear must crack with the intensity of the strain. Suddenly he discovered that he had an interest still left in his maimed life. He would listen for the sound of that voice. It would certainly speak again; he would wait for it.

The next afternoon Margy came again, but a new timidity had been born in her. She did not enter the cottage; she thrust her flowers through the open lattice, and placed them on the little table beneath the window. Dellow instantly perceived the fragrance, and slowly made his way across the room. Margy moved away, and disappeared round the bole of the great elm.

This happened every afternoon for a week. The old woman who came in the evening to cook Dellow's supper saw the room full of pinks and rue. He gave her no account of how they came, nor did she inquire. She was too much afraid of the blind giant to ask any questions, and only too anxious to perform her hireling duty quickly and be gone.

But all this time the voice had not spoken again, and it had now become the one passion of Dellow's life to hear it speak. He woke each morning with a trembling eagerness. The memory of its sweetness played round his heart like a soft flame, and melted the stubbornness of his anger against fate. He was beginning to suspect that some one loved him.

'Simon Dellow!' At last the voice had spoken.

It was the Sunday afternoon, and far off in the stillness there palpitated the faint music of church bells. He had heard the step along the road, he heard it pause at his threshold. It seemed

bolder now, firm and free; and suddenly the mists in the man's brain lifted, withdrew, and left the past revealed in vivid definiteness of outline. He knew only one step which could strike that rhythm. He clutched the arms of the chair with trembling hands, and waited.

'Simon Dellow, I 've come.'

'Who is it? For God's sake play me no tricks. Who are you?'

Margy came to his chair, and stood quietly before him. He rose and stretched out his hands toward her. He passed them over her dress, let them rest upon her shoulders, touched her hair, and very lightly let his fingers follow the contour of her face. She stood perfectly still till he had finished.

'Well, Simon?' she said.

'There was a woman once,' he said slowly. He swallowed a great sob, and went on again in a hoarse voice, 'A woman I loved, but who did n't love me —'

'Who said she did n't love you, Simon?'

'She did. I 'd done a wrong thing — never mind what it was — an' she said she 'd done wi' me. An' she were proud an' would n't make it up. An' I were proud and would n't let her.'

'Suppose she wanted to make it up now, Simon? Would you let her?'

'But she would n't. The woman I loved would n't. 'T is forty years since I danced wi' her on the May-day, an' I can feel the shape of her on my arm still. I shan't never see her any more now, but there 's no mistakin' the shape of her.'

Margy moved a little nearer the blind man. She took his arm and put it round her waist.

'The woman you 're a-talking of won't dance no more wi' you, Simon, but she 'd be real glad to have you love her.'

'But I be blind. No, no, that could n't be.'

'An' I be grey. You can't think how grey. O Simon, Simon,' she suddenly broke out, flinging her arms about his

neck, and drawing the blind face to her own, 'don't let 's play at love no longer. I know'd you loved me that first day when I called your name in at the windy. I saw it in your face. An' all these years I 've loved you true, an' not a night but what I 've a-prayed God for 'ee. But I would n't never ha' told 'ee, if you had n't been blinded. I could n't keep away no longer then. Oh, I could n't.'

Dellow made no attempt to reply. Like a great child he had laid his head upon her ample shoulder, and she was passing her fingers through the grey hair with the tender caressing touch of a mother.

'But I be so blind, so helpless,' the big man groaned.

'That 's all the better reason why I should love 'ee,' she said simply.

Then she added with a smile, 'When a man be blind, 't is nateral he can't make love, an' therefore he must just submit to be made love to. I do blush at bein' so bold, but there 's one com-

fort, deary, that you can't see me. An' you may be sure o' this, that if you 'd had your vision, I should n't never ha' dared to come near 'ee with they flowers.'

Dellow laughed, and in that laugh his nature recovered its balance, and life its zest.

'It seems to me you be takin' rare liberties wi' a blind man,' he said.

'An' mean to, unless he wishes otherwise,' she said.

'But he does n't,' whispered Dellow.

# XVI

## CRADDOCK GOES TO CHURCH

ONE day Craddock received a letter bearing the London postmark, and ten minutes later every one in Tibbit's Row was gossiping about it. As Sammy Nunn, the postman, went down the Row, he merely winked and said 'Craddock,' and people knew what he meant. Sammy had strict ideas of what was due to his calling, and never went beyond a study of postmarks, except in the case of foreign letters, whose envelopes are so flimsy that an inquiring mind cannot help acquainting itself with their contents. These rare letters he would hold carefully up to the light as he walked; and there was once something like a scandal because one of the nurse-maids at the Vicarage had caught Sammy in the act, and said that she knew by his manner that he had per-

ceived through the envelope the fourteen large crosses with which her lover was accustomed to seal his vows.

'Why, a blind man could see 'em, missy,' said Sammy, by way of apology.

'Not if he was n't looking for them,' was the retort.

Sammy took his revenge the next time a letter came by boldly announcing the result of his investigations.

'There 's only thirteen this time, missy,' he said. 'He 's a-gettin' cold out in them there furren parts. They mostly does.'

It was not until the Vicar reasoned seriously with him that Sammy came to see that there was any impropriety in his conduct. But after all the victory was with Sammy, for in the end the distant lover had to use thicker envelopes and pay extra postage.

It was very well known that Sammy took no notice whatever of merely local postmarks. It was only an 'up-country' postmark that excited his curiosity, and a London postmark most of all. When

he winked and said, 'Craddock,' every one in Tibbit's Row knew at once that Craddock had received a letter from London; and as Sammy had passed Craddock's door for twenty years, and not left him a letter more than half a dozen times, it was clear that something extraordinary had occurred.

Mrs. Splown, who happened to be bargaining with Craddock that morning about the re-soling of her second-best boots, was in the shop when the letter came, and within half an hour had set a vivid description of the scene circulating in the Row.

'It 'ad a black edge,' she said, 'an' the writin' was a woman's. Craddock, he looked at it first one way, an' then another, like a cat a-playin' with a mouse. It 's my belief as some one 'as died an' left 'im wi' money. Craddock 's just the sort o' man as gets money left 'en — him as ain't got neither chick nor child, an' been a-layin' up money for years by overchargin' for his work. But Providence always was contrairy that

way. Them as don't want nothin' gets the most, an' them as hev' been a-prayin' all their lives reg'lar for the Lord to look arter them gets passed over.'

In the course of the day public curiosity grew to such a pitch in Tibbit's Row that several persons whose boots showed comparatively slight signs of wear went to Craddock and gave him extensive repairing orders, with a view to observing how he bore his good luck. As the boots of Tibbit's Row never by any chance went to Craddock till they were in the last stages of decrepitude, nothing could be more eloquent of the degree of public interest which he had excited.

When Craddock came out of his shop at dusk, and made no attempt to light his lamp, and work on till ten o'clock as usual, it was felt that no further proof was needed of the change of circumstances which had happened to him since the morning. Persons who were accustomed to look in at the door and say, 'Well, Craddock,' now said respect-

fully, 'Fine night, Mr. Craddock,' whereat he smiled grimly. When he walked down to the station, and was seen by two small spies from Tibbit's Row studying attentively the table of fares, suspicion crystallised into certainty. There was no doubt that Craddock was about to take a journey, and as little doubt that he was going to London to claim his fortune.

Craddock did go to London, but the fortune he brought back with him was an entirely unexpected and preposterous one. It was a tall, pale girl, with dark eyes, which had a surprising power of quiet fire in them. She was dressed in a fashion that seemed altogether startling to Tibbit's Row, the chief items of offence being a bonnet with a large feather in it, and a red bodice, which did not become her. She visibly shrunk from public notice, and seemed in ill-health. Craddock gave out that she was his brother's child, and an orphan.

Now in a society where every one's antecedents are accurately known, there

is nothing more annoying than an inexplicable person. Dinah Craddock was such a person. All that was known of her was that she came from London, and that Craddock called her his niece. Moreover, she gave no one the opportunity of talking with her; at the first sound of a footstep on Craddock's threshold she vanished like a shadow. She rarely went out until nightfall, and then she went alone. After a while people found out that she always went to one place — a grey upright stone with a hole hewn through it, which stood on a solitary crest of the moor, about a mile from Plumridge Green.

This stone was called the Menlip Stone, though no one could explain why. All sorts of traditions gathered round it, and old Mr. Potterbee had been heard to say, that upon the smooth slab of rock at its base human sacrifices had once been offered. A more sombre legend was, that only a pure woman dared pass her arm through the curious hole which perforated it. If a woman

who had sinned attempted to do so, this cruel stone closed upon her arm like a vice, and maimed her for life. A little pool of black water gleamed on its eastward side, and it was said that it was full of the souls of sinful women, whose voices could be heard wailing out of its depths when the moon was at her full. On summer days children sometimes picnicked at the Menlip Stone, but no one would be found there after dark. It was to this solitary spot that Dinah Craddock constantly resorted.

The news was first spread in Tibbit's Row by Johnny Splown, who was working at a farm in the neighbourhood, and happened to pass near the Menlip Stone one night in May when the moon was full.

'I comed along careful, walkin' on tiptoe,' he told his mother, 'for I was afeard o' what I might see. An' sure enough, as I comed round the corner-like, some one rose up outer the grass, and give a cry. She stood before yon gra-ate stone, kind o' prayin' to it, an'

puttin' out her 'ands. I seed the moon a-shinin' on her, an' I know'd as it were Dinah Craddock by her bonnet. Then she went down on her knees beside that other stone what 's flat, an' started sobbin' an' cryin'. An' then I runned away, for though I know'd it were Dinah, yet she seemed most like a ghost, with the moon a-shinin' on her face, an' I were afeard.'

It was perhaps this story, and the suggestive tradition of the Menlip Stone, which started a new theory about Dinah in the popular imagination. Was she one of the women who dared not pass her arm through that cruel aperture in the stone?

It was the fertile brain of Mrs. Splown which first hatched this idea, and she was not slow to impart it.

'She do look like a bad 'un, she do,' this acute observer remarked. 'Craddock don't have no pride in 'er; 't is easy to see that. 'T is my belief he 's real ashamed of 'er, an' well he may be, a-knowin' what she hev' been. Look

at 'er, a-trapesing round with that flip-my-jack bonnet o' hern! You don't see Craddock a-goin' out with 'er; he knows better. It's enough for he to put up wi' 'er in the house; a shameless hussy!'

In a week this theory had taken rank among the primary beliefs of Tibbit's Row. The poor girl felt the sour unfriendliness of the faces that surrounded her, and shrank more than ever from contact with her neighbours. Her face had a sadder pallor, and purple shadows had gathered under her eyes. The gay bonnet was seen no more, and the red bodice had been exchanged for a plain black dress. The very children had been warned to avoid her, and her solitude was complete.

Perhaps nothing more would have happened, and Dinah would have been slowly assimilated into the social tissue of Tibbit's Row, but for an event which occurred toward the end of July.

She still went at intervals to the Menlip Stone, drawn to it by some occult

affinity, though latterly she had reached it by a roundabout way, which she took on purpose to avoid observation. On this summer evening she set out as usual, walking with her head sunk on her bosom in forlorn thought. The stone stood upon a grassy barrow, on which lines of encampment could still be traced by the learned. Quiet sheep now fed on these slopes where men had fought, and there was no stir of life save the motion of the wind, breaking in long waves of sound, as upon a phantasmal beach. On the apex of the slope the granite mass of the Menlip pierced the blue sky like an attenuated obelisk.

Approaching from the side which Dinah had chosen, it was not possible to see the whole bulk of the Menlip till the summit was reached, for though it appeared to crown the exact apex of the barrow, in reality its base was a few feet lower than the summit. The way she had chosen was unfrequented: the usual path being on the other side of

the barrow, for this was the southward side, and the one from which the view of Barford and the winding river was seen. Thus it happened that Dinah reached the stone, only to find on the other side of it a group of Barford youths and lasses, who had been concealed from view by the top of the ridge. Lost in thought, she stepped upon the ridge, and stood silent a moment or two before she perceived them. Then a volley of jeering laughter saluted her.

Some of the girls contented themselves with looking at her curiously, and then turning their faces away in ostentatious disdain. There was something so pathetic in the slight dark-clothed figure and pale face, silhouetted against the clear sky, that it ought to have moved their pity; but the jeering laughter of the youths had already decided the situation.

'Come along, and put your hand into the Menlip, Sally,' shouted one of the youths. ''T won't bite 'ee.'

'I 'm not afeard,' said Sally.

It was a challenge which was instantly taken up by the whole group of girls. One after another came forward blushing, and thrust a stout arm into the jaws of the cruel stone.

'Did 'ee feel anythin', Sally?' whispered one girl.

'Not I,' said Sally. ''T is all a tale.'

'I know one as durs' n't do it,' said Johnny Splown, who was one of the party, and who had felt a keener animosity towards Dinah ever since the night she had frightened him with her sobbing.

The speech was the signal for a simultaneous rush on Dinah. She was surrounded, and pushed toward the Menlip.

'Now, Dinah, let 's see you do it,' jeered Johnny.

The hideous bulk of the thing rose before her, darkening all her thoughts. At the height of her bosom yawned the terrible hole, like the mouth of some pitiless reptile, jagged and deep. Was

it indeed all a tale that those cruel jaws were capable of closing on human flesh and blood? . . . She shuddered, shivered, and fell helplessly on her knees.

'Oh, I can't,' she wailed. 'It's cruel to make me. Let me go.'

'I told 'ee so,' jeered Johnny. 'I know'd Dinah durs' n't.'

But the girl hardly heard him. She was lying prone across the smooth slab of granite beneath the Menlip, that altar where long ago women, warm with life as she was, had been slain in sacrifice. She was overwhelmed with shame, sick, and half-dazed with humiliation. Her hat had fallen off, and her black hair streamed across this altar of a past cruelty. She had hurt her hand in falling, and one clear drop of blood had fallen on the stone where so much blood had been shed.

Some of the girls looked at her now with real pity, but none cared to help her. They stood huddled like a flock of sheep watching her. Then they moved away one by one. They began

to laugh as they went down the hill. Their voices grew fainter in the distance, and at last complete silence settled down upon the scene. A bird uttered a harsh cry in the darkening heavens. A sheep came timidly up the slope, and finding a human creature still there, softly padded down again, bleating as he went. The sun went down and the stars came out. Still Dinah Craddock had not moved. She lay like one dead beneath the mouth of the Menlip; the huge stone frowned over her masterful, ironical, pitiless. It was only by her sobbing that one could have guessed she lived.

Late that night Craddock sent for the curate. Reckitt came at once, somewhat astonished at such a request. Craddock took him upstairs to the tiny room where Dinah was lying on her bed.

'Dinah, here 's Muster Reckitt,' said Craddock hoarsely.

The girl opened her eyes a moment, and looked eagerly at the curate.

'He looks a kind man,' she said faintly.

'Tell him all about it, deary,' said Craddock.

'Oh, I can't. I 'm so 'shamed . . . so wicked. I don't want to live no more. An' I 'm afraid to die. I can see Jesus Christ a-sittin' on the judgment-seat, an' oh He looks so stern at me!'

In those words she had told all her pitiful story, and Reckitt had understood. He sat down quietly beside the bed, and took her hand.

'Dinah,' he said, 'will you listen just a moment? There was once a woman like you who saw Jesus Christ go up the street of Jerusalem long ago. Up to that time she had never thought anything about being good. She had done wrong, because she was young and thoughtless, and had n't listened to her conscience. But when she saw Jesus, it came to her all at once how good He was, and how bad she was. And then she could n't do wrong any more. She ran out and fell at his feet, and dared

not look into His face, because, like you, she felt He would look sternly at her. Do you know what she saw when she did look up? She saw a face that was all pity, all love, and kindness. And then he stooped and said softly to her, "Thy sins which are many are all forgiven thee: go in peace and sin no more."'

Oh, blessed art, that can distil into a few brief words the dews of compassion, and drop them on the thirsty, sterile soul! If Reckitt had done nothing else in all his three years' toil in Barford he had done enough that night to justify a life all too brief.

'We are all sinful,' he said solemnly. 'Some of us go wrong in one way and some in another. We all of us need pardon. I once saw a picture of the wicked going away into punishment, and in the corner of the picture was the blessed Lord. But do you know what He was doing? He was n't angry — only grieved. He had laid His hand upon the shoulder of one of

those unhappy creatures, and so kindly, that you could almost hear what He was saying. He was saying, "I don't want you to go. It breaks My heart to let you go. Even now, if you will turn and look at Me, I can save you." For I think that if any one, even at the judgment-day, looked up and said, "Lord, I 'm so sorry I never loved Thee, but I love Thee now," He would look at them just as He looked at that poor woman long ago in the street of Jerusalem, and said, "Thy sins which are many are all forgiven. Thou art forgiven much because thou lovest much." '

There was a long silence in the little room. Dinah had covered her face with her hands, and lay so still that death could scarcely have been stiller. The candle, placed in the tall candlestick on the little table at the foot of her bed, heightened the illusion. It was so like the light that burns beside the dead that Craddock's mouth quivered. It brought back to him that

bitter hour long years before when . . . But of that hour he dared not think. He hastily took the candle and placed it on the window-sill.

'Hush,' said Reckitt, laying his finger on his lips. He also was thinking of the dead, but it was of the dead soul that comes to life again. Craddock stood stock-still beside the window, with his back turned, and once more the silence deepened in the room.

'Oh, I dare not,' suddenly wailed the girl. 'I can see it move. It 'll crush me. Don't make me go nearer to 'en. I tell 'ee 't is no stone — 't is a great live devil, an' I can see the fire a-boiling in its cruel mouth. . . .'

She had sat up on the bed now. Her dark eyes were a-blaze with terror. Her hands were stretched out, as if to push back some devouring monster.

'Go in peace, thy sins are forgiven thee,' said the curate in a clear, low voice.

The girl looked round her vacantly. Then, quite suddenly, the terror passed

out of her face as the dark shadow of a cloud rolls off the moorland. She burst into tears.

'Oh, I've been so wicked,' she sobbed. 'I never meant to be. . . . I allers wanted to be good. It hurt me sore to do wrong, it did. . . . "Thy sins which are many are forgiven 'ee." Oh, but I do love Him for sayin' that.

> "Gentle Jesus, meek an' mild,
> Look upon a little child."

I used to say that once . . . maybe He'll hear me if I say it agen.'

The curate's eyes shone. 'I can do no more,' he said. 'But she's found the right road, and a surer hand than mine will lead her back.'

As the curate went downstairs, Craddock laid his hand on his arm. 'I doubt,' he said, 'I've been wrong about a lot o' things. There's that prayer about thankin' God for deliverance from this troublesome world, what I could never pray. But if Him as is above be like what you say, it makes a power o'

difference. Maybe when he took my little maid, it were because He wanted to save her from the sorrow that poor soul upstairs hev' know'd. Muster Reckitt, I guess I 'll turn over a new leaf. Me an' Dinah 'll come to church on Sunday, if you don't object.'

# XVII

## BROTHER DYEBALL

WHEN a tea-meeting was held at the old Meeting-house, it was the frugal custom to dispose of any superfluous provision by auction. Mumsley, mounted upon a form, with a cake in one hand and a plate of sandwiches in the other, was then to be seen in his glory. Malicious persons sometimes remarked that Mumsley's efforts as an amateur auctioneer were much superior to his attempts as an amateur preacher; but they ought to have remembered that he was naturally more at home in selling things than in offering them for nothing. Some persons objected to the custom altogether, but others regarded it as the most delightful feature of a tea-meeting. The first were those who had given the cakes and sandwiches;

the second were those who purchased them for next to nothing.

On these occasions there was always one episode which to a stranger would have seemed curious and even comic. It was well known that Mumsley acted with deliberate unfairness in knocking down whole traysful of provision to some of the poorer people without so much as a bid being audible.

'Sarah Ann Jenkins has it at tuppence-ha'penny,' he would remark.

'Well, I never,' grumbled Mrs. Splown, whose attachment to Church and State was never proof against the seduction of excellent Dissenting victual at a cheap rate, and who therefore never failed to be present on these occasions. 'I'd ha' give thruppence for it mysel'. Did n't I call out thruppence, Sarah Ann?'

'You did,' said the washerwoman, with gloomy conviction. 'I heard ye.'

'All in good time,' Mumsley replied, with his eye severely fixed upon the two malcontents. '"It is not meet to take the children's bread and cast it

unto . . .'' He did not complete the sentence, from a sense of politeness, and as Mrs. Splown's knowledge of Scripture was limited, she never suspected the insulting nature of the omitted noun. The true-born 'meetingers' did, and grinned genially.

'I know as I called thruppence,' said Mrs. Splown stubbornly.

'You did,' said Mumsley, thus put on his defence. 'But a true hauctioneer don't wait for no calls. He do see a bid in people's eyes. 'T is the eye as does it, an' I seed tuppence-ha'penny in the eye of Sarah Ann Jenkins. Was n't there tuppence-ha'penny in your eye, Sarah Ann?'

'There were,' said Sarah Ann, in a voice of timid triumph, as she hastily swept the pile of provision into her ample apron, feeling that this was pre-eminently a case in which possession was nine points of the law.

' 'Tain't the voice as does it, but the eye,' Mumsley went on, magniloquently. 'Voices sometimes can't be heard, but,

brethren, the langwidge of the heye can't be mistook.'

It was one of Mumsley's chief barriers to perfect success as an orator that his aspirates increased in the ratio of his excitement.

Mrs. Splown thereupon resolved to fix her eye on Mumsley in such a way that its language should be unmistakable. But here the unfairness of Mumsley became most apparent. He took particular care not to look in Mrs. Splown's direction again till all the best lots were disposed of. It was not until a sordid pile of broken food was offered that he said benignantly, 'Mrs. Splown has it at fourpence-ha'penny,' — which was obviously too much. After this manner did Mumsley assert the rights of Dissent, and avenge himself for being nicknamed a 'meetinger.'

But the most curious feature of these auctions always occurred at their close. The last thing put up for sale was the naked remainder of the ham from which the sandwiches had been cut. When

Mumsley waved this object of derision on high, there was a pause, and it was clear that something perfectly foreseen was expected. People nudged one another, but no one bid, and even the most eager eye was powerless to arrest the attention of Mumsley. Then there would ensue a noise as of a form creaking, in the remotest corner of the room. The people looked at one another and smiled slightly. Lastly, a tall lean figure reared itself above the crowd, and a weak voice that seemed to have something between a stammer and a giggle in it said, 'Brother Dyeball will take the ham-bone.'

To see Brother Dyeball step forward with a curious mingling of cunning and dignity, of humility and triumph, and wrap the ham-bone in a clean newspaper which he had brought for the purpose, was a spectacle at once ridiculous and pathetic. It was clear that the man was of weak intellect, and there was something in his attenuated figure that suggested famine. Yet one saw at

a glance that his coat, worn and frayed as it was, was of better cut and material than was common in Barford. His voice also was singularly pure and high in spite of its weakness, and had an indefinable accent of gentility in it. His face was of ivory pallor, the jaw long and finely rounded, the eyes of soft blue like the cornflower, and set deep under shaggy grey eyebrows. The forehead was high and arched, the grey hair was thin, and smoothly brushed over the crown of the head. The shoulders were narrow, and seemed narrower through his great height. He looked something of a scarecrow; but perhaps that suggestion arose from the knowledge we had of his occupation, which was to sit for hours on farm-gates in the spring, and frighten birds away from the growing crops. He had not been born in Barford, but he had lived there so long that no one remembered when he came. He dwelt in a mere hut beside the river, about a mile out of the town, and quite alone. He rarely appeared in the town

except on Sundays, for it was the custom of the Barford boys to shout insulting observations after him, such as 'Look at Dyeball's legs,' and 'Who made your trowsies?' And he knew by experience that the only day when he could pass up Barford High Street without molestation was the Sabbath. The reference to his legs was obvious. They were so long and thin that they reminded one of the shanks of a skeleton, and there was always a foot or so of blue cotton stocking visible between the hem of his trousers and the top of his shoes.

After one of these Meeting-house auctions I took a fancy to wait for Brother Dyeball as he came out of the schoolroom with the ham-bone under his arm. It was a clear evening of early spring, and I had a mind to taste the sweet air after the acrid heat of the schoolroom, and a sudden interest in Dyeball suggested the notion of walking home with him. The full moon was already in the sky, and the earth breathed softly in a bath of silver.

Brother Dyeball looked at me with some suspicion as I joined him, for I fancy he imagined I had designs upon the ham-bone. To my observation that it was a fine evening, he curtly replied that he had seen finer. After a while we reached his hut beside the river, and by that time he had grown sufficiently used to my company to offer no objection when I followed him into his strip of garden. The hut was very solitary. It was built of mud walls which in some pre-historic period had been whitewashed, and was roofed with a decaying thatch. A gaunt fir rose at its northward angle, towering like the vast plume of a hearse into the emerald sky. Everything breathed of desolation and decay, except the garden, which was sedulously well kept.

'You look well after your garden,' I remarked.

'Yes, yes,' the old man answered absently. 'It gives me something to do when work's slack.'

He took no further notice of me, but

went into his hut hurriedly, as if conscious of some pressing duty. Left to myself, I looked at the garden with a little closer attention and was surprised to find that the whole of one side of it was given up to a crop of what seemed to be mustard and cress. The next thing I observed was that the mustard and cress was sown in regular forms, which seemed to represent letters. This was, of course, a common enough practice among children, but it seemed strange that Dyeball should follow it, and especially that he should execute the design upon so large a scale. Gardens are the only wealth of the poor, and it was all the more inexplicable that so poor a man as Dyeball should give up half his little patch of ground to so unprofitable a crop. The light in the sky was so bright that I could easily distinguish the letters formed upon the soil by the delicate green crop. Standing well back from them, I saw that they spelt the word WILLIAM, and underneath the name there was the number 19.

The next thing I noticed was that Dyeball had lit a small oil lamp, and had placed it in the window. As it was not nearly dark this seemed an extravagance, and, moreover, it was curious that he should place it so conspicuously in the window. Suddenly I remembered that often when I had come home late along the road I had seen that tiny yellow star burning in Dyeball's house, a mere spark of flame at the end of a deep funnel of blackness. I was pondering these things when Dyeball came out of his cottage. He seemed to have entirely forgotten my presence, and was talking rapidly to himself.

'Nineteen, and nigh on three months, 't will be now,' he was saying. 'Three an' nine make twenty. A W and two LL's: they little seeds must know by this time all about it. 'T is forty year an' more since he comed to me, a-runnin' in his little white pinafore, an' says, "There 's something happened real wonderful, for the earth 's writ all over with my name." An' sure enough, there by

the sunny wall where the peach was flowered were his name all in green of mustard an' cress, — WILLIAM, as plain as could be, an' under it a 2. . . . Three an' nine make twenty. . . . Ah, but it's a long, long sum to add up, an' someway it don't never seem to come right. . . . O Lord, you're such a long way off that sometimes it do seem as if you have forgot poor old Brother Dyeball!'

His voice broke into a childish cry with the last words. The old man stood just outside the cottage door as he spoke, quite erect, his hands stretched out before him in protestation and appeal. The full moon shone upon his face, and touched the angles of his quaint figure with ghostly silver. There was something so weird and desolately pathetic in the scene that it sent a shiver to the heart.

'Brother Dyeball,' I cried, 'what is it? What's the matter?'

But it was quite evident he did not hear me. When I touched his hand it

was stiff and cold. He had passed into a cataleptic condition. He stood as though rooted to the ground, the moonlight seeming to drip off him, as the water sparkles off some stone figure in a fountain. The spot was so solitary, the plume-like fir lifted into the sky so black, the gaunt figure of the old man rigid in the moonshine so dreadful, that a brave man might have been forgiven a shudder.

To leave him in such a condition, even to seek help, was impossible. Naturally, therefore, I edged myself behind his rigid form, and went into the cottage to see if I could find any means of restoring him. It was a room so miserable that I have never since been able to remember it without a poignant thrill of pity for the poor. The floor was of earth, the walls discoloured with damp. A piece of green wood smouldered in the broken grate. But in striking contrast to the general squalor was the table, which was covered with a coarse but perfectly clean white cloth. In the

middle of the cloth was a blue dish on which lay the ham-bone. There were two chairs placed against the table, and two plates laid upon it. Between the two plates the Bible lay open, as if preparation had been made for family prayers.

At the moment it did not occur to me to connect the two seats placed at the table with anything the old man had said. I noted the circumstance vaguely, supposing it to be an example of that fine instinct of hospitality which is always found among the poorest. No doubt Brother Dyeball had intended asking me to sup with him, and was coming to bid me welcome when the cataleptic fit had seized him. A great softness of pity filled my heart in the thought of this half-famished old man inviting me to share his scanty meal. Half mechanically I sat down on one of the chairs, and in the moment while I sat Dyeball must have shaken himself free of his trance. I heard a long sigh, and the movement of a foot at the door.

The next moment he entered the cottage. And then there rose from the lips of the old man a cry, so thrilling and piercing, that I can only describe it as the voice of an agonized joy.

'*William!*'

That was all — this one word. But it revealed everything. He sprang upon me with an almost tigerish affection. He flung his arms round my neck and sobbed. Suddenly he drew back scared, for he had seen my face. His wits seemed to have left him again, and he began to mutter, 'Three an' nine make twenty. O my God, it's a long sum to add up, an' someway it don't never seem to come right. . . . O God, have pity on poor old Brother Dyeball!'

I laid my hand on his trembling shoulders, and said as kindly as I could, 'Brother Dyeball, you 've got some secret sorrow. Tell me everything. Let me be your friend.'

'I thought you was him,' he said simply, speaking like a little child who has a lesson to repeat.

'Your son?' I said, pretty sure that I had guessed right.

'Yes, William. Two LL's and a W. . . . They little seeds is mighty cunning, and by this time they knows all about it.'

'Where is he? Is he in America? Did you expect him back?'

'No, not in America,' he replied.

'Where, then?'

'In gaol. . . . In Belchester gaol. He never did nothin' wrong, my William. But they took him an' shut him up. 'T is nineteen year and three months ago, an' three an' nine make twenty, an' at twenty they 're bound to let 'en out. Sometimes I 've heerd tell they lets 'em out before the time is up, if they behaves well, an' I 've been expectin' my William every night this year an' more. Someway I thought as he 'ud come to-night. An' when I see you a-sittin' there I thought as you was him.'

My eye caught the open Bible while he was speaking. It was open at the story of the Prodigal Son. That, and

the light in the window, told their own tale.

'Yes,' he said, as if reading my thoughts, 'the light 's been burnin' ready for 'en every night, an' the Bible 's been open, for he always were a good lad, an' fond o' the Book. I mind when he were a little chap wi' curly hair, how he 'd climb upon my knee and coax me for to read the Book. . . . An' then they took 'en an' shut 'en up in prison . . . my William, as never did no wrong. . . . You noticed, maybe, that there mustard an' cress a-growin' in the garden?' — this with a look of intense craft.

'Yes, I saw it.'

'I 've growed it every year since he were took away. I thought maybe as he might come when I were out in the fields, an' it 'ud be nice for him to see his name a-growin' there fresh an' green. Kinder show he had n't been forgot. William — an' under it the figure o' the year since he were took away. That there father in the Bible did n't think o' that. He did n't reckon that maybe his

son 'ud come back when he were out, an' no one to bid him stay, an' nothin' to show he were remembered. But poor old Brother Dyeball thought of it . . . he thought of all these things, an' acted accordin'.'

'When was it he was — took away?' I said gently. 'I might make inquiries for you, might find out when he is really coming back.'

The old man's eyes kindled, and he laid his hand upon my arm.

'If you only would, sir,' he said. 'I 've been a many times to Belchester gaol to ask, but they don't tell me nothin'. Sometimes they laugh at me, an' sometimes they do say, "You 'll know soon enough, never fear." 'T is real perplexin'. "Tell my William I've been, an' I loves him well, an' am waitin' for 'en," says I. An' they says, "We 'll try." But when I asks them to let me see 'en, they allers says, "Not to-day. He can't be seed to-day. This is n't the right day, you know." 'T is real perplexin'.'

When I left him that night Brother Dyeball seemed much comforted. The effort of unburdening his mind of its lonely secret seemed to have strengthened his faculties, and acted on him like a subtle stimulus. He stooped less, his voice had a vibrant note of resolution in it, he once more wore the dignity of a man. It is surprising how swift and efficacious is the action of a mere drop of that divine cordial called hope upon natures that have long yearned for it in vain.

A week later I happened to be at Belchester on business, and in the afternoon I called on my old friend lawyer Trunnion, with a view to understanding how it was best to act in the case of Brother Dyeball. I told the facts as I knew them, and before I had finished found Trunnion smiling.

'You smile,' I said, a little hotly. 'It seems to me one of the saddest things I ever knew.'

'I was not smiling in ridicule, but in pity, I assure you,' said Trunnion. 'We

lawyers often have to smile to cover deeper feelings. It 's just a professional habit we have.'

'Well, can you do anything for poor Dyeball?' I asked.

'He 's past help, poor fellow,' said Trunnion.

'What do you mean?'

'You shall hear,' he said. He rose and drew from a drawer a file of newspaper cuttings that were yellow with time.

'Here are the plain facts. Poor Brother Dyeball, as you call him, is well enough known in Belchester. I believe he was once a prosperous tradesman here. Once a month at least he asks for admission to the gaol, and when he is refused, sits all day staring at the stone platform above the great gateway, where they used to hang men. Twenty years ago his son William was hanged over that gateway. . . .'

'Hanged?' I cried in horror.

'Yes. It was a clear case against him, and from the first there was no

hope. You can read all about it in those newspaper cuttings. Dyeball saw him hanged, and it broke down the poor fellow's reason. He lost all memory of the dreadful scene, and from that day has been under the merciful delusion that his son is merely shut up in Belchester gaol, and will come out some day. They all know him at the gaol, and pity him, and don't undeceive him.'

I thought of the light burning in the window, and the open Bible, and the two chairs at the table, and the name growing in the garden, and I choked.

'Poor Brother Dyeball,' was all that I could say.

Since that day I have joined the conspiracy to deceive Brother Dyeball.

# XVIII

## THE LAST ADVENTURE OF JOHNNY DEXTER

THE child stood quite alone in the green wood. From the belfries of the cloud the note of a lark rang shrill and clear, and the wind sounded like a distant bugle in the tree-tops. When the song of the lark ceased and the wind sank, the wood was very still.

The child was Johnny Dexter, and he was quite alone to-day, because his sister had been ingloriously captured by the schoolmaster in the very act of truancy. As the child had grown older a singular and pathetic frailty had declared itself in him. It was a little like the frailty of a flower which is perfectly knit and fashioned, but set upon a stalk so slender that we fear what may happen to it in a rough wind. There was no lack of soft bloom upon his cheeks or of

eager animation in his limbs, but his blue eyes were larger than a child's should be, and many dreams lay in them. There was a certain eagerness of joy about his face, a look of hunger and of wistfulness, an unearthliness, if one may call it so. He was an imaginative child, to whom the ideal was real, and the real of very little interest.

On the previous night he had lain awake talking with his sister, until she had bidden him be silent. She had commanded silence at last because Johnny would talk of only sad and painful things. He had explained to her at length his views upon death, and the subject frightened her, for Polly was a healthy-minded little maid. Among other things he had told her that he never saw a hearse without wondering what it would feel like to ride in it.

'Go to sleep,' she said at last peremptorily. 'You must n't think about it.'

'But *It* makes me think about *It*,' the child answered solemnly.

Polly turned on her side, and in five

minutes the hospitable gates of sleep had opened to her; but Johnny lay long awake, watching an interminable array of hearses defile upon the darkness, and wondering whether dead folk talked to one another when they lay so close in Barford graveyard. It was very likely, Johnny thought. He was quite sure that when he was laid beside his mother he would want to tell her things; and the first thing he meant to tell her was how kind father had been to him since she died. She would be very glad to hear that, and she would kiss him softly in the dark. It was such a long, long time since Johnny had been kissed by his mother.

But this bright spring morning all these dismal thoughts had disappeared, and the waves of sunlight went rippling over Johnny's little brain. A whisper ran through the woodland, thrilling the child; a thrush uttered a deep flute-cry, as if striking the ringing key-note for all the waiting choirs of spring; the cuckoo spoke — the sound of a hoarse soft bell

in the long-drawn leafy isles; the dove called — the voice of love out of a dim, mysterious sanctuary. In the exquisite stillness the murmur of the grass was audible — the hum of a populous and busy city. The sap was rushing in the trees like a tide, and from time to time sharp, joyous explosions were heard, as the bark cracked before the strain, and the sheath of the leaf burst. The new-born leaves twinkled in the sunshine like green stars; they danced together as if they were all a-throb with life. A pink snow of wild cherry-blossom fell softly on the grass; here and there it fell also on the rounded ridges, sheeted with purple wind-flowers, so that they resembled the foam-flecked waters of a waveless sea. The ancient rapture of the earth, the joy that life takes in itself, the passion of mere living, sacred and immemorial, shook all the woodland, and made it quiver with a thousand pulses.

The child stood quite silent, and certain tiny seeds of folk-lore, sowed in his brain by superstitious generations, be-

gan to stir and flower. Was it true that the Little People, each smaller than the pink-fringed daisy, hid under these dew-starred grasses? Was the cry of the pee-wit the cry of poor, lost, unbaptised children, who beat their tired wings at the gates of heaven in vain? Was the toad, with his beady, wicked eyes, the Evil One himself, watching ambushed under the foul dock-leaf for the step of the unwary? The woodland seemed clouded over for an instant by this latter thought. And Johnny had never been baptised — so they had told him — and so he would never be with his mother after all. He would beat his little tired wings against the golden gates, and she would never hear his cry. Yes, she would, though; and if no one else would open them, she would. He was sure of that. God might do what He liked, but this was what his mother would do. Nevertheless, he wished he had been baptised. It would have saved so much trouble; and, besides, there might be something in it after all, and his mother might be

asleep when he cried, or too weak, perhaps, to unbar the golden doors. ''Specially if they 're heavy,' he added aloud.

He sat down upon the stump of a beech-tree and began to think very hard. He looked first to see if there was a toad beneath it: no, there was only a deep hollow lined with moss, with soft beads of dew threaded on it. And, as he thought, the thrush drew out his flute-stop again, and the linnets, all in a quiver of delight, made reply, like the sopranos of the choir of spring rehearsing their parts.

All at once another note began to be heard in the wood, and the child listened with new eagerness. There were delicious trills and bravuras; note tumbling after note in a riotous cascade, then a silence, and after that a music so soft and sweet and slow, so intentioned and complete, that no bird could equal it. There was a sound, too, of leaves brushed aside and cracking twigs, and of a footstep on the grass. But

the music never ceased. It had become a silver riot again; the notes danced and twinkled on the air; the very thrush had fallen dumb in sheer astonishment. Last of all a bough swished sharply, and a curious figure with a flute came into view.

He was an old man, with a tangled mass of soft white hair. His cheeks were thin yet ruddy, and his eyes of a blue like the sea. He was very tall, and he moved with a light, firm step. His boots were yellow with the gathered pollen of the meadow flowers; a bunch of purple-white anemones was fastened in his battered hat, a chain of daisies hung round his throat. A blue jay hopped behind him, coming at his call, and a flute was at his lips. He came along the wood-path, fluting with all his might, and his eyes shone like stars. His clothes were old and ragged, but Johnny did not notice that; the child's eyes were fixed upon the wondrous face of the man. It was like nothing he had ever seen; it was infinitely joyous, yet

infinitely sad; it seemed like a face aflame. Yet there was something wild and vacant in it too, and the child was half afraid.

The man with the flute stood still when he saw the child, and in the silence the measured tapping of a woodpecker was heard, and the hum of the grass broke out again. Then the man smiled — a slow, wise smile — and Johnny felt more at ease.

'Well, sonny, and who might you be?' he said, speaking slowly. The voice was a sweet tenor, with a curious quaver in it. It seemed to the child that it was the flute that spoke.

'I'm Johnny — Johnny Dexter, that is,' the child answered gravely.

'You didn't think as you'd meet me this morning, did you?' said the man.

'I didn't 'spect to meet no one,' said the child.

'But I knew as I'd meet you. Something told me. That's why I played so loud. It was to let you know I was coming.'

The old man pushed his hat back from his white hair, and sat down beside the child. The blue jay hopped upon the stump of a tree a yard or so away, and gravely watched with head on one side. The wood had grown very still, so still that one could hear the wild cherry blossom as it rustled down, and the blades of sword-grass as they rubbed against each other in the swaying air.

'As a rule, people don't like meeting me,' said the old man talking softly, as if to himself. 'Yet I love them, and I could show them many wonderful things if I liked. I can see what no one else sees, and hear what they don't hear.'

He laughed, and the blue jay, watching his mood, chuckled hoarsely in reply. Then he added, as if carefully deliberating, 'But I don't know if you be one of them as loves me or not, and so I don't know whether I can show you things or not. Do 'ee see, Johnny?'

Johnny's small face grew perplexed. He had run into the wood that morning

all a-thirst for adventure, and here was an adventure curious enough. But it was a strange thing to be asked if he loved a man he had never seen before. The child glanced shyly at the ruddy face, and the keen blue eyes burning like keen blue flames beneath the shaggy white brows. Upon the whole, the face looked kind. It would be a great thing to see what no one else had seen, and hear what no one else had heard.

While the child sat, puckering his small brows in thought, the old man had put his flute to his lips again. He sounded half a dozen random notes, so piercing, sweet, and mellow that the child's pulses leapt in his veins. Then the notes fell into a tune that seemed to breathe all the mournfulness of things, so solemn was it; it changed, and seemed like the bugle of the spring blowing through the woods; it took a swifter measure, and now the little silver notes danced and leapt like raindrops in a shower; and the man rose and began to dance with them. His

hat fell off, and his white hair tossed upon the wind. His face shone with ecstasy, and seemed more than ever like a face aflame. He pirouetted, sprang aloft, whirled like a leaf upon the equinox, turned this way and that in a very fantasy of motion, and all the time the little silver notes bubbled in the flute as though they could not come fast enough. The blue jay leapt behind his flying heels in uncouth simulation of his energy. The very woods seemed to dance with him, and the spots of sunlight on the grass ran to and fro, like the quivering of yellow water. The birds woke up and sang with all their might, emulous and envious, and the wood was in a riot. A squirrel ran across the grass, and scampered up a tree to watch; the bright eyes of a weasel glittered in the earthy doorway of his home. The high white clouds went past in a jostle of eager speed, and the myriad leaves flashed and twinkled more than ever like green stars; and the wild cherry-

trees were all afoam with the rushing tides of spring, and spilled themselves in white waves upon the grass. All the while the man danced, and the flute rang out clearer and clearer into the very heart and bosom of the wood. It was all so wonderful and strange that the child stood spellbound. But not for long. The man seized his hand, and he also began to dance. There was a joyous madness in it all; the child had never felt so happy in his life. His curls stood out, like a whirling mop, his eyes sparkled, his little frame was all alive with pleasure. Suddenly the flute stopped, and the wood-magic ended. The squirrel disappeared, the weasel vanished in his hole, the woods grew still, and the blue jay gave a chuckling laugh.

The old man sat down again upon the beech-stump, and drew the boy to his knee.

'Well, sonny,' he said, 'that was pretty good, was n't it? Will you go with me now?'

'Where shall we go?' said Johnny.

'Ever so far away,' said the man. 'Would n't you like to see the Land of Flowers?'

'What 's that?'

'It 's a place not far from here. It 's a land where there's always spring. In it there are no cold winds nor snow, and the people eat four times a day, and when they sleep they dream beauteous dreams, and no one is unhappy. And there are no schools there, and the only bell that rings is the bell that rings them out to play.'

He smiled a little whimsically as he uttered this last sentence.

'It sounds like heaven,' said Johnny simply.

''T is very like it,' said the man. 'I know.'

'Should I meet mother there?'

'Why, for sure, sonny. She 's been wanting you a long while, and has been asking every one she met if they'd seen little Johnny Dexter anywheres.'

'How do you get there?'

'Oh, 't is not far. You can reach it in a day, and the road 's quite easy.'

'Could n't I run back, and bring Polly with me?'

'No, sonny, there is n't no time for that. They shut the gates early. And besides, Polly 'll come presently. She is n't wanted there as much as you be, and she does n't want to go particular. My word,' he added, with the pretence of taking out a watch, 'it 's time we went, if we be going. We can't afford to wait no longer.'

The child looked up and said, 'Well, I think I 'll go.'

He put his hand into the hand of his strange guide, and the two went off into the heart of the wood. An hour later, when the child's feet grew weary, the man began to play upon his flute again, and all weariness vanished. For again the wood grew alive at the strange music, and joy gave wings to the child's tired feet.

They passed many places as they went

where the blue-bells ran along the hollows in a living wave of colour, and primroses shone like fires under the shadow of huge oaks and elms, and many times the child thought they must have come upon the Land of Flowers at last. But the man always said, 'Not yet, — a little further on;' and besides there was no sign of the child's mother anywhere. Later in the afternoon a shrewdness grew upon the air, and the sound of the sea was heard. They were walking now down a dim aisle of plumed pines, and presently their feet took the sand. The long sea-shore ran empty and desolate for miles, and far out at sea rose a lonely rock with a white lighthouse on it. Near the shore, moored in a little cove, a boat tossed, and in it lay a pair of oars.

A pee-wit cried overhead, and Johnny's earlier morning thoughts came back to him. He thought of that appalling legend of the unbaptised children, and he felt sad. Then he bethought him that this wise old man might know all

about that too, and he suddenly resolved to ask him.

'Have you to be chrissened to get into the Land of Flowers?' he asked.

'Eh, what's that?' said the old man.

Johnny told him how the pee-wits were the souls of unchristened children flying round the gates of heaven in vain. He spoke very earnestly, but the old man laughed when he had done.

'If that's all,' he said, 'I'll chrissen 'ee, my son. 'Tis an excellent idea.'

A sudden thrill of fear ran through the child. There was a new tone in the old man's voice, a wildness, and a vague determination, through all of which there ran that little quaver of senility.

'I think I'd rather not,' said the child.

'But you must,' said the man. 'Sure, sonny, you would n't be a bird always crying out in pain, because it can't find its home. No, no, we 'll baptise 'ee safe enough, never fear.'

The man put his flute to his mouth, and began to play once more. It was a

slow, sweet hymn-tune; it was very solemn, yet it seemed full of comfort too. Johnny felt fear no longer: he had a sense of being in church.

Before them lay the sea, a wide plain of soft vague violet. The little crisping waves ran at their feet, and the boat rose and fell gently. The old man took a handful of salt sea-water, and sprinkled on the child's golden head.

'Johnny Dexter, I baptise 'ee, so as you may go safe through them heavenly gates,' he said, 'in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost.'

'I 'm glad you thought of that,' he said quietly, when this strange chrism was at an end. 'Sort o' makes things easier, my sonny. I 've heard that people die easier for it.'

He stood erect, looking out over the violet sea. His blue eyes grew wider, his frame stiffened, his jaw grew rigid. For an instant the child saw him as something terrible and fantastic, and would have fled. But the man suddenly

broke out in a clear, peremptory voice: 'Now listen,' he said, 'and do as you are told. You must get into this boat, and row straight for yonder rock you see. Pull round it to the seaward side, and there you will see a cave. This cave is the doorway of the Land of Flowers. You must enter it, and knock three times upon the wall, and then the rock will open, and you will go in to the happy land.'

'But are n't you going with me?' said the child.

'I can't,' said the man. 'But I 'm going to see you go. In with you quick. They shut the door at dark.'

Johnny's lips began to tremble. This was an end to his adventure for which he had not bargained. But the man's face had now grown grim and pale, and he dared not disobey. Beside this, it happened that of all things he had longed for, the chief thing was a boat. He knew very well that he could row, and after all the rock did not seem far away, and the sea was smooth.

He stepped into the boat, and the man began to play upon the flute again. The notes thrilled across the quiet water on the evening air, and as the man played faster, so it seemed to Johnny that he was compelled to pull faster too. He was tugging at the oars now with might and main, and the tide was with him. The man grew indistinct upon the shore, but still a thread of melody ran quivering on the sea. The waves began to leap about the boat as the dappled sunlight in the woods had leapt. The darkness came down, and the waves ran edged with flame. The child was worn out now. He had ceased to row, and lay very quiet in the bottom of the boat watching with frightened eyes the green-blue fire that burned in these heaving waters. Then he fell asleep and dreamed. He thought he saw his mother coming to him with sea-anemones woven in her hair, and a string of sea-shells round her throat. And the sea-shells made music as she came; each was the lip from which

melody was blown. He heard a bell ringing heavily and slow. That surely was the bell that rang for holiday in the Land of Flowers. He saw a land starred with golden roses, and the roses smiled on him. Then his mother took him by the hand, and kissed him. And then . . .

It did not last a moment. He heard the great bell ringing over the sunken edge of the Shark Rock and saw a wilderness of foam. But even then it was not all fright he felt — that soft fluting music still rang along his memory. The Shark Rock has no mercy, and in an instant Johnny Dexter had found the Land of Flowers.

In St. Colam next day, Billy Rosevear, the scant-of-wit, rose with the dawn. His face was troubled, for he had done something the day before of which he had no memory. He tried to patch together the ravelled threads of recollection, but in vain. He looked upon the faded flowers in his hat, and sighed. He was not sure whether the

thing that he had done was kind or wicked, and there was no one to tell him. Well, what did it matter? He blew a few notes upon his flute, and his sense of the joy of life came back to him. For Billy the world held neither past nor future; life was an eternal present tense.

As he went up the street, sounding soft notes upon his flute, his face was like vacant water, on which the tide of yesterday leaves no sign.

When some one — a stranger in the place — asked, 'Who is that odd creature with the flute?' the quick reply was, 'Oh, that's poor Billy Rosevear. He's a little cracked, but quite harmless.' And so no one knew or guessed how it was that Johnny Dexter played truant so well on that spring morning long ago that he strayed into heaven unaware.

# XIX

## THE GATE OF HEAVEN

IT had so long been a certainty with Reckitt that his days were numbered, that when one morning he coughed a little more violently than usual, and saw blood upon his handkerchief, he felt neither surprise nor fear. On the contrary, he smiled faintly, and lay back in bed a long time thinking, with that quiet smile, like a soft veil of light, lying on his face.

The room in which he slept was the best one Mrs. Splown's house could show, though, as the neighbours had often remarked, 'poor was her best.' The carpet, after serving many more years than could fairly be claimed of it in the curate's living-room, had only been relegated to the bedroom that spring, in the hope that it still had a

decade or so of endurance left in it. Everything in the room was of the same type. The door of the wardrobe, which had been smashed by a former curate of athletic tendencies, who was accustomed to take dumb-bell exercise in its vicinity, had never been mended; for Mrs. Splown regarded curates as a confederacy, and it was only fair that what one broke another should put up with. A long and various race of clerical boarders had slept in that room. The splash of ink upon the wall near the bed recorded the clumsiness of a curate long ago, who had been accustomed to write his sermons in bed, because he entertained a fixed belief that bed was the only proper place to think in. The hole burned in the curtain was the work of the same gentleman, whose name was still terrible to Mrs. Splown as a synonym of domestic havoc. It was this lodger to whom Mrs. Splown had presented an ultimatum one morning to this effect: 'These habits under my roof I will no longer tolerate. Signed, Mary

Ann Splown.' But even Mrs. Splown had admitted that Charles Reckitt was a model lodger, whose crowning virtue was that he put up with anything, and wanted hardly any waiting on. Certainly he had put up with a good deal, and among many thoughts that came to him that morning this persistently intruded itself.

But it did not come to him by way of complaint. He knew that things could not help being as they were, and that nothing could alter them. He had always been accustomed to take a half-humorous view of his discomforts. It troubled him a little to think of lying ill for long in that forlorn room, but it troubled him still more to think of the burdens which his illness might impose on others. 'Poor Mrs. Splown,' he thought. 'She 's done her best. It won't do for me to let her know anything of this. I 'll hold up as long as I can, and say nothing. Perhaps it won't be very long.'

His eyes roamed round the room. In

the recess by the fireplace was a little shelf of books, mostly old college prizes. How hard he had toiled to win them, and how eager he was for knowledge in those days ! Now even knowledge itself was ceasing to interest him. Already the wise voices of the earth seemed far away, an attenuated murmur like the hum of a school which one is leaving. He seemed in the last five minutes to have passed into a land of strange silences.

On the table in the recess at the other side of the fireplace stood the leather case which held his pocket communion service. Above it on the wall hung a crucifix. The smile upon his face gathered an intenser light as he looked at them. He who had seen so many die was not afraid of death, and his soul whispered to him the name of Him who kept the keys of the grave.

Presently he rose from his bed, and began to dress. It was a slow process, and it revealed to him how his weakness was growing on him. It gave him plenty

of time to think matters over, and by the time it was finished he had arrived at one clear conclusion. He would not give in till the last possible moment. If he had to die, he prayed God he might die working.

When he went downstairs, Mrs. Splown was waiting for him in the sitting-room, which also served as his study. It was a pleasant little room when the sun came round and looked into it toward afternoon, but in the morning it was cold and dreary. He could not help shivering as he entered, for the fire which had been lit an hour before had gone out. Mrs. Splown noticed his glance toward the fireless grate, and began volubly, 'Ah, there 's that fire out agen. I told Ameliar Ann to light it long ago, but she 'ad to go off to school at half-past eight, an' so she jest put a match into it an' runned away. An' I 've been that moithered with the childer this morn, particeler Tommy, what 's got the croup a-comin' on, that I declare I forgot all about it.'

'Oh, never mind the fire,' said Reckitt cheerfully. 'I dare say we can soon put that right.'

'Well, in a way o' speakin', if you 'll pardon me for sayin' of it, 't is your own fault 't is out, sir. Ameliar Ann thought you was a-comin' down directly, an' would look after it, or she would n't ha' left it. She 's a rare careful little maid is Ameliar Ann.'

'Yes, I 'm late. I was n't very well this morning, you see, Mrs. Splown.'

For the life of him he could n't help making that confession. A sudden sense of his loneliness overcame him. He looked timidly at Mrs. Splown's red face, with the unexpressed hope that there might be some gleam of motherliness in it to encourage him. It would have been an immense comfort if he could have said, 'There 's a man under your roof who has not a month to live. His mother is dead and his friends are far away. Promise to be kind to him for the little time that he will be here.' But the cloud that instantly gathered

over Mrs. Splown's face at the mere mention of his not being well at once drove him back into silence.

'I'm sure I 'ope, sir, as you ain't goin' to be ill, for what I should do if you was ill I don't know. 'T is moil and toil now from morn till night, what with the childer an' their ways o' walkin' where the most dirt is — but a sick man in the 'ouse 'ud be worse nor all the childer for work. Twenty year the curates hev' lodged wi' me, an' there 's ne'er one hev' been sick, save the one as died here of the fever, which no one could 'elp, an' his friends behaved real han'some to me, when they come to berry 'im.'

'Oh, don't fear,' said Reckitt quietly. 'I don't intend to *let* myself be ill. Of course, as for dying, that's another thing. We none of us know when our last hour is appointed.'

'That's as true a word as ever was,' said Mrs. Splown, whose mind had now been diverted to a subject in which she took the deepest interest. 'Offen an'

offen hev' I said so. We can calcilate when we is to be born, but we none of us knows when we is to die, an' therefore it becomes us always to hev' our coffin-clothes laid up ready, wi' sprigs o' lavender in 'em, in case we should be took sudden. But bless me, sir, there 's your breakfast all a-gettin' cold, an' 't is close on ten by the clock.'

'He 's lookin' rare an' bad,' she said to herself as she fumbled off into the kitchen. 'I don't half like the look on 'im. But there, he do never look no other. 'T is the creaky door as lasts longest. When the wind blows 't is the highest chimbley falls first. The little chimbley don't take no 'arm. An' there 's one thing to be said for 'im, he don't give no trouble; not near so much as some on 'em as hev' kep' in bed if their finger ached, an' made me traipse upstairs wi' their food, tho' they was as strong as strong.'

Reckitt also said something to himself as Mrs. Splown left the room. He said, 'Yes, it 's wise not to let her know, and

it was cowardly of me to say what I did. She 's enough to trouble her, poor woman, without being troubled over me. I hope, please God, I shall be able to get about to the end.'

He ate his breakfast in silence, and when the table was cleared rose softly, and found an old rug, which he drew round his shoulders. 'I would n't like to let her see me wrapped up like this,' he thought. 'It would be like blaming her about the fire. But it really is very cold.'

He went to the little lattice-window and looked out. The small leafless flowers of the jasmine which grew against the wall were out, but there was no other sign of spring. The day was grey and cloudy, and the earth was still parched with the northeast wind. The larks alone knew that spring was coming, and sang joyously. Perhaps from those airy towers of vision where they sang they could look over the round of the world, and discern far off the spring slowly climbing

up behind the herald swallows, with her robe of yellow daffodils streaming out behind her on the turbulent nor'easter.

'I should like to see the spring again,' he said wistfully.

He turned from the window, and sat down at his desk, drawing the rug closer round his narrow shoulders. From the secret drawer at the back of the desk he drew out a little pile of gold and counted it carefully. He smiled as he said, 'There will be enough.' Then he took from the desk many carefully folded papers. Last of all he came to a photograph and laid it on the desk beside the year's almanac.

He sat a long time looking at the photograph and the almanac. His thoughts were, ' Easter is late this year, and I should like to live to Easter, for Olivia is sure to be staying at the Rectory at Easter. Not that it makes much difference now. That dream is over. But it would be pleasant to see her once more before the end.' Then, as if ashamed of such thoughts, he hastily put

the photograph back in its place, and locked the desk.

He looked out again at the hard, grey sky, and began to put his boots on. He coughed as he did so, and again there was that tell-tale spot of blood upon the handkerchief. But he had long trained himself in simple reverence for duty, and he saw nothing in his condition to give him excuse for idleness. There was Dexter to be visited that morning. He had been ill with rheumatic fever, and in these despondent hours of slow recovery was fighting over again his old enemy, the drink. It would need all the curate's patience for the next fortnight to guard Dexter from his enemy. And there were half a dozen others whose souls were in his hands. The night had not come yet, and there were some last hours of light wherein to work. The curate pulled on his boots with difficulty, put his communion service in his pocket, and went out.

During the month that was yet to

elapse before Easter, Reckitt was indefatigable in his duties. As he had always looked frail, few people noticed that during this month he looked worse than usual. With the one exception of the gentleman of athletic tendencies, whose dumb-bell exercise had proved ruinous to Mrs. Splown's furniture, all the curates Barford could remember had been somewhat pallid youths. It was as natural that curates should be pale as that farmers should be ruddy. The only person who seemed to have the least realisation of Reckitt's condition, strangely enough, was Dexter. Since the day when his children had been found, Dexter had been a changed man, and his love for Reckitt had an almost canine fidelity about it. Whenever he felt the old passion for drink remastering him, he sent for Reckitt. He felt that Reckitt alone had a talisman to subdue the monster.

'He's not long for this world,' said Dexter, with an accent of agony, one afternoon when Reckitt had left his

house. 'Those fools can't see it, but I can. O my God, can't you take me, and leave him what's so much more wanted?'

But Reckitt never permitted Dexter to say a word to him on the subject. Dexter had to take refuge in wringing the curate's hand, and eyeing him with looks of dumb affection. One day he went a little further. He had been to Belchester, and had discovered there a famous herbalist, whose medicine was guaranteed to cure all diseases of the lungs at the third bottle. Dexter brought back three bottles in triumph, and pressed them on Reckitt.

'Well, I'll take the stuff for your sake, Dexter,' he said, with a smile; and Dexter felt happier, having a supreme faith in the Belchester herbalist which was denied to Reckitt. But apart from poor Dexter, no one in Barford seemed to have the least suspicion of his condition. There was a good deal of sickness about, and sickness in the usual way is selfish. People were

too busy in clutching at the golden sands of life for themselves to notice that the curate's hold on life was failing.

So the weeks wore on to Easter, and at last the bells pealed forth the resurrection gladness over an earth that had itself risen into new life. The weather had now passed into sudden summer. The clouds floated high in heaven, and a soft, southwest wind was abroad. The curate heard the bells as he lay in bed that morning. He crawled out of bed that he might open the window to hear them better, and stood listening. During this week he had to invent the fiction of a bad cold, in order to satisfy Mrs. Splown that there really was a valid reason for staying in bed an hour later. In a box beside the bed were many blood-stained handkerchiefs which told their own tale. But of that box he kept the key.

It was while he stood at the window that his cough came upon him with bitter violence. It was more than he

could bear, and he fainted. When Mrs. Splown came up, the red life was welling from his lips. Concealment was no longer possible.

Later that evening Reckitt woke from a deep stupor, and asked for Dexter. His instinct told him Dexter would not be far away.

'I want you to go to the Rectory with a note,' he said faintly. 'You will find it under my pillow. I wrote it a month ago. You need not wait for a reply.'

The note was addressed to Olivia Grey. She was the daughter of the Dean of Belchester.

In the course of an hour Olivia came to Reckitt's humble lodgings. Mrs. Splown, who did not know who she was, showed her upstairs with an air of relief. She imagined that Olivia was a rich relation who had come to take care of him.

The tall, proud girl, whose beauty was destined to win her within a year or so an unhappy marriage and a fash-

ionable career, drew near the dying curate. She had once seen a good deal of him for a brief month in Belchester, and had been struck with his fine qualities. But she was entirely unaware of the effect which her beauty had produced on him. In her heart she resented his request to come and see him. But her eyes softened as she looked upon the eager face that welcomed her, for after all she was a woman of noble soul.

The curate put out his hand to her, and she took it impulsively.

'O Mr. Reckitt,' she said, 'I'm so grieved to see you like this.'

'Yes, I'm dying,' he replied. 'Don't be afraid,' he added, as he saw her turn pale. 'The end will not come just yet. I want to tell you something . . . to ask something of you.'

She sat down beside the bed, pale and uneasy.

'I want to tell you I love you,' Reckitt said simply. 'Of course I always knew it was no use. But I

have dreamed my dream, and it made me happy. I have had what people would call a lonely life. My father and mother died long ago. I have no brothers, or sisters — no friends. . . . Forgive me if I loved you . . . I should never have told you so if I was not dying . . . but I felt you would n't mind my telling you before I go.'

The girl's eyes filled with tears. She turned her face away, but at the same time put out her hand to his. 'O Mr. Reckitt,' was all that she could say.

'I want to ask one little thing of you,' he said tremulously.

She nodded her head in silence.

'Would you mind kissing me? . . . It 's a good deal to ask. I know I have no right to ask it. But no one has ever kissed me since I was a child. . . . It 's so lonely to die with no one to . . .'

He could say no more. His eyes shone and his emotion choked him. But he had said enough to move the girl's soul to its centre. Many things came back to her; how she had flushed

with anger once when her sister had coupled his name with hers; how she had owned to herself all the time that this lame little curate had a soul worthy of any love . . . if only he had not been lame, and a friendless curate.

'Oh,' she cried, in sudden self-shame, 'I don't deserve that you should have loved me so.'

'You deserve the best love, the best man can give you,' he said simply.

The silence grew between them.

Then she stooped, her eyes full of tears, and kissed him softly on the forehead. He lifted her hand to his lips and kissed it.

'You've been very good to me, Olivia,' he said, as she rose to go. 'I've often wondered whether this hour would come. I wanted to live till Easter, because I knew you would be in Barford then. . . . I believe God has given me the only thing I really wanted on earth in your kiss. Good-bye.'

She stood looking at him irresolutely. Then she said, with sudden emotion,

'You asked me to kiss you for pity's sake. I am going to kiss you now for your own sake, because I honour you.' Her face flushed and paled.

'No, no,' she added in a low voice. 'Let me tell the truth. Not because I honour you only — but because I love you.'

'Olivia!' whispered Reckitt.

'Yes, it is true,' she went on passionately. 'You have helped me to see my own soul. It is something that does not often happen in a woman. And I see it too late.'

'And I . . . ah, if I could live; it is too late for me also,' said Reckitt.

'You are the happier,' she answered bitterly.

She stooped again over the pallid forehead, and was gone.

After that Reckitt lay quite silent for a long time. Dexter had with difficulty gained permission to sit with him till midnight. Toward midnight Reckitt asked Dexter to read to him from the Bible.

'Read one of the Easter lessons,' he said. 'Read the story of Mary at the tomb.'

Dexter struggled through the chapter with difficulty. When he had finished, Reckitt said, as if talking to himself, 'How they must have loved Him—those women. When it was yet dark, very early in the morning, they were there. And behold, this was the very gate of heaven, for the stone was rolled away . . . the gate of death . . . the gate of heaven. . . .'

'You 'll take the medicine, sir, I humbly trust,' broke in the voice of Dexter. 'That man down to Belchester is an uncommon clever chap, an' he told me that it never failed if it were persevered in long enough.'

'He was safe in saying that,' replied Reckitt with a smile. But the point of the remark was lost on Dexter.

'Do 'ee take it, sir,' he pleaded. 'I 'm a clumsy-minded man, an' allers were, an' I can't say what I want to say. But, oh sir, you hev' saved my soul, an'

I can't tell 'ee how I loves you. . . . God grant as you may be better in the mornin'.'

'Never fear,' said Reckitt, with an attempt at his old cheery manner. 'I shall be better in the morning.'

He had not the heart to tell Dexter the truth. But as he heard the big man's step lumbering down the narrow stair, he whispered to himself:

'Yes, please God, I shall be better in the morning. With Christ, which is far better. . . . It 's been a long road, but the gate of heaven is not far off now. . . . There is a light upon the road. . . . And Olivia loves me. . . .'

He fell asleep, and those who saw him in the morning felt a great awe, but no fear. His face was the face of one who had seen a glorious vision. The gate of heaven, as it opened, had left a radiance on the brow which was not of earth — a conquering tranquillity.

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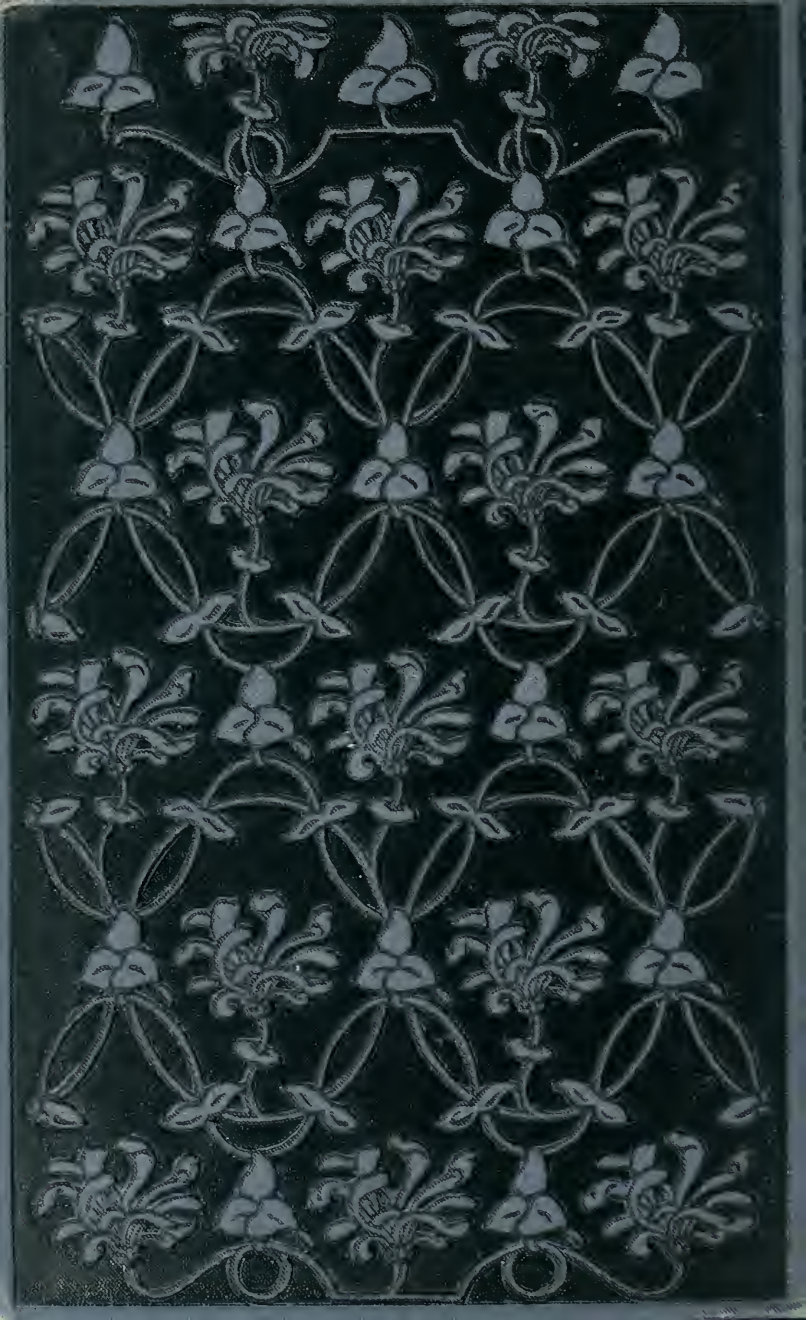
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